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THE MISSING WILL.

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THE MISSING WILL.

BY

HERBERT BROOM, LL.D.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON:

CHAPMAN & HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

1877.

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LONDON:

BRADBURY, AGNEW, & CO., PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.

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THE MISSING WILL.

CHAPTER I.

ERRINGTON PRIORY.

SITUATE in a pleasant valley in the county of Kent, surrounded by gently undulating and well-timbered fields, is the little village of Errington, adjoining the source of one of the streamlets which intersect this favoured county. Close to Errington, although not visible from it, is an old monastic mansion, locally known as the Priory, which has for centuries been the residence of an ancient family.

The Vernons indeed had other ample possessions, but through generations had

shown a predilection for this place, and passed at it the greater portion of the year.

Of this family the sole representative at the date of our story was Mr. Edward, or, as he was usually called, Squire Vernon, an elderly gentleman, with whom resided his adopted daughter Julia, also bearing the name of Vernon—an orphan very distantly related to the Squire, and left dependent on his benevolence and bounty.

The Priory is a large irregular cruciform structure, of which some parts are referable to the Decorated period of architecture which prevailed during the time of the first three Edwards, and others had been built so recently as the eighteenth century. In Catholic times this building had been the rectory of the parish, to which, early in the seventeenth century, a nephew of Archbishop Bancroft had been preferred. The

arms of Oxford University, of which the then rector was a distinguished member, impaling Bancroft, were emblazoned on the library window.

The history of this mansion, so far as ascertainable, was almost purely ecclesiastical. The ground on which it stood had been granted by a saintly priest in the time of King Canute to the monastery of Christ Church, Canterbury, "to God's servants for garment land;" and although afterwards seized illegally by Odo, the tyrannical Bishop of Bayeux, was restored after a brief interval to its former owners.

At the Reformation, and subsequent redistribution of ecclesiastical property, the Priory with surrounding farms and manors, was confiscated to the Crown, and regranted to the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury, from whom it passed in modern times to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and was by

them alienated to its present occupant. The Vernons who preceded him having had successive life estates in this particular property, but not the absolute ownership of it.

A Gothic mansion which for centuries has been used as a dwelling-house, whether by ecclesiastics or laymen, and has been added to from time to time according to the fancy or necessities of its occupant, will assuredly be irregular and unsymmetrical. So the Priory, facing westwards, when viewed from the front presents at one end—towards the north—the appearance of great antiquity, pierced with mullioned windows, and supported by buttresses ascribed to Prior Selling of Christ Church, Canterbury, who flourished at the close of the fifteenth century; whilst towards the southern end the eye ranges over architecture referable to comparatively modern times, where what

had once perhaps been merely lofts used for the stowage of agricultural produce, now figure as commodious apartments, and exhibit outwardly the ordinary appearance of an English dwelling-house.

Between these extremities of the building, under one continuous roof, intervenes a hall or refectory, over which are extensive attics.

The Priory is for the most part ecclesiastical, not in any sense baronial; and contiguous to it were formerly immense barns for the reception of tithes when paid in kind; there had been also a farmyard inconveniently near the mansion. These nuisances had, however, long since been abolished, and their places supplied with the choicest evergreens and exotics, with the smoothest, greenest, and silkiest of lawns.

The general appearance of this fabric is, irrespective of its surroundings, suggestive

of buildings often found in the precincts of our Cathedrals or Colleges, or of a commodious deanery; the main walls are of flint and stone, similar to, though not identical with, the Kentish ragstone. The windows have been much meddled with by successive occupants; in some places the mullions having been wholly removed, owing doubtless to their decayed condition, and in other places the Gothic frameworks having been replaced by abnormal sashes. So the chimney stacks have been rebuilt and modernized, doorways have been altered or reconstructed, and marks of the innovator's hand are everywhere noticeable. These signs of changes more or less recently effected are at once intelligible to the learned antiquary, who is moreover gifted to reproduce the past to his mind's eye, and see the Priory again as once it was. Strange that a monument of past ages so

interesting as this, should have been overlooked by local archæologists, or even by others resident far away from this particular locality; strange that it should have escaped the researches of Dugdale, and Hasted, and a host of living writers pursuing their inquiries, and treading in their paths.

Squire Vernon was over seventy years of age; his hair was snowy white, his countenance ruddy, his frame muscular, and his physical health to all appearance good. The pervading expression of his face indicated a kindly disposition. A stranger when first introduced to him, could not, however, fail to trace in it evidence of strength of will; the chin, though slightly wrinkled, which bespeaks benevolence, was angular, which betokens firmness, perhaps obstinacy, whilst throughout the face there was more evidence of rectitude of intention than of depth of intellect.

The Squire was thoroughly old-fashioned in his ways, and in his dress—in the morning affecting top-boots and their concomitants, though in the evening he conformed strictly to modern usages.

Our heroine Julia Vernon may be introduced to the reader by reference to a picture which hung on a wall of the refectory; it was the portrait of a lady of surpassing beauty—a pictured face which had for more than a century gazed indifferently down at a changing crowd of critics. The features were clearly cut and delicately tinted, mobile through all their unchangeableness. The countenance was sensitive, yet self-contained, proud yet tender; with pencilled brows and dark eyes, a little weary; with lips which were neither smiling nor sad, but indicated the possibility of a lovely smile; about them was a faint contraction, which showed they had known

what it was to close resolutely over passionately or firmly spoken words.

A great painter was once called upon to admire this picture, and whilst he regarded it, the old man's face was scarcely less a study than that before his eyes. He rapidly noted its beauties—the soft tint of the flesh, so colourless and yet so life-like; the careless masses of brown hair under the large quaint hat with its plume of pink feathers; the exquisite curve of cheek, and dimpled chin; the dainty shoulders rising from the folds of the dim blue dress. He gazed steadily on in a growing absorption that was blind and deaf to all surroundings. His rugged face softened, a tender pity came into his eyes, the hard lines of his mouth relaxed, and there dawned upon the spectator a reason why this man could touch the public with his works.

Through all the lapse of years the meaning

of that face could appeal to him, and wake a power of sympathy that was half divine. He saw the dual life: the one deep, passionate and tender, vibrating under the veil of studied self-control; the other made up of high-bred indifference that seemed like coldness, of a quiet courtesy that ruled as it yielded—the pain that quivered back from sight, lay bare before his eyes, the tender womanliness dropped its shield of pride.

A bystander having chanced to ask presently some commonplace question as to the artist's opinion of the painting before him, the old man started and almost shuddered.

“I am not criticising a painting,” he said; “I am reading the story of a life.”

This picture was by some attributed to Gainsborough, by others the touch was thought rather to be that of his nephew

Dupont. It represented a member of the Vernon family, whose lineaments had been marvellously reproduced in our heroine.

Julia Vernon had the same dark eyes as had the face portrayed upon the canvas, the same masses of brown hair, the same curve of cheek and dimpled chin, the same lips which were neither sad nor often smiling; hers was a fair, peaceful, pensive face, meant, it would seem, for some other than this struggling world—meant for some sphere where fraud and trickery, where petty jealousies and rivalries are unknown.

Another resident at the Priory was a white poodle, which was the Squire's especial pet. Julia called it his shadow, and certainly the two were much together, and each seemed to hit off with wondrous accuracy what was passing in the other's mind.

Gibby, who came within the general

designation of a French poodle, although in fact he was from the rock of Gibraltar, had many of those whims, foibles, and caprices, the existence whereof renders the French poodle psychologically interesting.

There is, moreover, a reason or motive for much that he does—not of course always to be recognised by the transcendant intellect of man. A look or gesture may, however, be significant to the least observant, and his mode of speech by bark, howl, growl or whine, may surely be interpreted.

This species of dog, in short, though by some persons undervalued and maligned, is really possessed of marvellous intelligence, and even when, through lack of education, not particularly tricky, may afford constant amusement to his master.

Just now—it was in the month of July, 187—, the poodle, who had been lying asleep on a rug in the hall of the Priory,

manifested great excitement, accounted for by the sound of approaching footsteps.

It was Julia coming in from the garden, with her basket of roses and other fragrant flowers, gathered to refresh the vases in the drawing-room.

In the season of roses this was her daily and most pleasing duty. We may perhaps be expected to describe her dress as ivory-coloured serge, trimmed with subdued blue and brown galloon. This would, no doubt, be the right costume for a young lady in the month of July, 187—. But this would not be consistent with truth : for two reasons. Julia's garden toilette was rather behind the fashion, first, because her uncle—though supplying very liberally her purse—had no idea of the expense of ladies' dress, which becomes, at this date, antiquated in three months or less ; and secondly, and quite as much, because her uncle preferred pure

white and bright colours to the subdued and dull shades just then so completely the rage.

She made a very pretty picture in her white piqué dress, shady hat with high crown, ornamented by white currants and leaves ; at her throat a soft blue ribbon which suited her lovely brown hair, exquisite complexion, and blue eyes. Her dress was so looped up and drawn through a broad sash of the same colour, as to disclose the slippers with their high pointed heels, which tapped the marble pavement as she walked.

As Julia entered the hall from an inner apartment, the latch of the outer door, which opened directly on to the carriage-drive, was raised, and Squire Vernon came upon the scene.

“Oh, dear uncle!” (for so she always addressed him), “how delightful this is—

a note from West Woodham Court, asking us to a garden-party on Friday; it must be a garden-party, you know, for the time named is from three to seven. Of course we shall go, shan't we, uncle?"

Now, although no father ever doated on his daughter more than the Squire doated upon Julia, a garden-party, which in his view was a modern innovation, did not offer any attraction—indeed, was not at all to his mind; but of course he would not altogether disappoint his ward.

"My dear Julia," he said, "I think, at my age, I may be excused going to a garden-party, and, besides that, the petty sessions are held on the same day, and I must meet my brother magistrates, as a disagreeable case is to come before us. I'll tell you, my dear, how, perhaps, the matter can be managed. I dare say that our good friends, the Lesters, would give you house-

room as their guest for a day or two before and after the garden-party."

And so it was finally settled, after the interchange of various minute epistles between the Priory and West Woodham Court, that Julia should go there for the garden-party and stay over Sunday.

CHAPTER II.

THE GRANGE.

NEAR the Vernons lived another family, the Dangeleys, possessed of far less wealth than the Squire, and, though highly respectable, of a lower social position. It consisted of a widowed lady, her son John, and daughter, Melanie. The Dangeleys were originally D'Angelis, of very ancient lineage, their predecessors having come over to this country, it was believed, during the wars between the Guelphs and Ghibelins, at some period in the thirteenth or fourteenth century.

An ancestor of the family, the Count d'Angeli, had then lost his patrimony, as

some supposed through confiscation, an ordinary consequence of war, or as others believed, through the fraud and perfidy of a friend. The whole matter was wrapt up in mystery, and not likely to be, with certainty, unravelled.

The most probable version of this great vicissitude was as follows: the Counts d'Angeli, from whom the Dangeleys derived their origin, were, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, firm supporters of the Colonna family at Rome, and as loyal feudatories had on more occasions than one held their castle of Angelo against the Ursini. These rival houses were frequently opposed to each other in arms, and about the close of the thirteenth century the Ursini, siding with Boniface VIII., whose election to the popedom was disputed by the Colonna family, attacked and ravaged their possessions, especially directing their animosity

against the Count d'Angeli, whose castle was besieged by them and destroyed, the ploughshare, as an emblem of perpetual desolation, being driven over the ground on which it had stood.

After this terrible reverse, the Count shared the temporary exile of the Colonnas, but did not return with his patrons to Italy. He finally, after many wanderings, established himself in this country, and being aided by the munificence of his especial friend Count Sciarra Colonna, embarked in commerce, which for a long time was carried on by several of his lineal descendants with moderate success.

Dispensing with their title, which seemed incompatible with the pursuits of trade, and allowing their name to be gradually corrupted into Dangeley, the history of the family was uneventful; the grandfather of the late Mr. Dangeley ceased to be connected

in any way with business, and since his death the family had lived in the village of Errington, though not, during the whole period, in the same residence, as country gentlefolks.

This family kept themselves very much aloof from the neighbouring gentry, for though a kind of genteel poverty had long been their portion, pride accompanied it, and except with the Vernons and the people at West Woodham Court, the Dangeleys had little interchange of hospitality. Between themselves and the Vernons, however, there was, or was rumoured to be, a double tie existing, for whilst John Dangeley, though too young as yet to marry, was enamoured of, and supposed to be agreeable to Julia Vernon, George Vernon, a relative of the Squire who will figure prominently in this story, was by general repute the accepted lover of Melanie.

Singular as it might seem to those versed in match-making, no objection was raised to these initiative arrangements, if such there were, either by Mr. Vernon or Mrs. Dangeley; the thing seemed to outsiders quite understood that the families would be united by this double tie, and though the money was on one side, pride of ancestry, at least equal in degree, was on the other.

The Grange, where the Dangeleys resided, was a pretty enough place, eclipsed, however, by the adjoining Priory; the house had been the parsonage, until, with the sanction of the proper authority, a new vicarage had been built, and The Grange had been altogether secularised. It lay embedded amongst trees and evergreens, and partly covered with clematis and ivy, whilst during early summer the Sicilian pea flourished round its base, brightening the pleasant scene with

its gorgeous blossoms and graceful tendrils. At this season, also, the sweet-smelling syringa, with the rose, and the old-fashioned allspice, perfumed the air, which in the murmuring breeze drifted away, charged with delicious odours. Thus sings, rather than says, the American poet, in reference to an imaginary palace which his vivid fancy had conceived:

“ And every gentle air that dallied,
In that sweet day,
Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,
A winged odour went away.”

The principal abiding charm about The Grange was, however, in the evergreens which encircled it. True it is, that in these northern latitudes the mournful and majestic cypress is rarely to be seen. In place of it, however, we have the yew, the ilex, and the box, the laurel of divers species, and the aucuba, whose golden foliage shines

so resplendently. These flourished at The Grange, and many of the deciduous plants were not less charming there, especially the acacia, or, more properly, locust tree, with its huge spreading branches and rugged furrowed stem. There were, also, many varieties of the pine tribe, including that hardy and useful plant, the Austrian pine; there were the thuia, the juniper, and the arbor-vitæ.

Mrs. Dangeley was an excellent mother, and had brought up her two children with excessive care. John had just left Colleg at the age of twenty-two, and Melanie was in her eighteenth year. The period in the life of either was critical: the youth had to choose a profession, for he could not live in idleness, and the maiden had shortly to decide definitely about a husband. Of each the mother was the dear counsellor and friend.

The characters of her children were however very dissimilar. Melanie's features and complexion were alike indicative of a Roman rather than of a Saxon origin: the outline of the face was oval, and perfectly regular, it was tinted as the olive; the eyes were almond-shaped; the mouth showed resoluteness, and the power of carrying out a purpose formed; the nose was slightly arched, the hair might be called black. This face was comely to behold, it was one which sank into the mind of the spectator—it was that of a person who might have done great deeds, had fortune or misfortune allowed of them. Perhaps it seems strange that a face thus formed should belong to one born in an obscure village, and destined according to all probabilities to lead an obscure life; strange that features which were fitted for the occupant of a throne, should be those of Melanie Dangeley.

Yet somehow the expression of this face, the expression gathered from its combined features, was not exactly pleasing; the brow, the eye, the nose, the cheek, regarded individually was beautiful, was matchless, the hair was so soft and lustrous, that whilst like the raven's wing, which is the work of God, it was like the purest velvet, which is the work of man. Nevertheless the countenance of Melanie Dangeley was not altogether satisfactory; the soul which should have beamed from it was wanting, or, if there, was obscured by earthly clouds and vapours.

Where was evinced that kindliness of nature which underlies so many virtues; where was evinced that charity which covereth a multitude of sins; or where that love, saintly and ineffable, which is vouchsafed to mortals for their guidance and support?

Where, the spectator might ask himself, was to be found in that face any trace of a sympathising spirit; of feeling coming straight from the heart; of genuine tenderness and truthfulness—where was there any evidence of soul? The Creator cannot err; had He then designedly omitted something in the moral formation of this creature?

The character of John Dangeley was at once discernible from his face, which was of the familiar Saxon type; the complexion was very fair, his eyes were blue, his hair was light, the expression was thoroughly manly.

This face was remarkable for the frankness and honesty written on every line of it, for fearlessness and determination. It was also remarkable for simplicity—not that simplicity which is akin to folly, but that rather which is allied to candour and con-

fidingness, kept from excess by a sound and stable judgment.

The daily course of life at The Grange was monotonous, although perhaps not more so than at many other quiet places, and in many an English household. Visiting amongst the poor was scarcely to Melanie's taste, she rather occupied herself on a fine day with the garden and its belongings, and, when the weather was adverse, in the conservatory, a structure erected on the most approved plan, at some little distance from the house, as Mrs. Dangeley thought that the scent of flowers, however delightful in itself, was not quite agreeable in a drawing-room.

Melanie, besides being an accomplished vocalist and pianiste, painted well in water-colours. Often did a passer-by—for The Grange was not far from the road—linger to listen to the notes of the rich contralto voice

which met his ear; often did the visitor at The Grange gaze enraptured at the water-colour pictures, and even some few in oils, which hung upon its walls—they came from the easel of Melanie Dangeley.

Perhaps it might be thought that Melanie too much aimed at effect—at captivating the hearer or spectator—that she wished rather to astonish than to please him, to excite in him admiration rather than any higher, more genuine, or softer feeling.

As for John Dangeley's pursuits, he must be held excused, if, in the interval between his College career and entrance on some life-long occupation, he amused himself at The Grange as best he might according to the season of the year, sometimes with his gun, for he had full permission to range over Squire Vernon's land, sometimes with his rod, and sometimes, when he could get a mount, with the foxhounds.

John Dangeley had not particularly distinguished himself at Trinity College, Cambridge, whence he had just emerged a Bachelor of Arts. In his first year he had indeed obtained at the collegiate examination a place in the highest class. His inclination was towards mathematics. He could not, however, afford himself the advantages of private tuition, and the monotonous method of instruction adopted by the College tutor, and his droning delivery, gradually induced a lack of zeal in the pupil, so that John Dangeley having given some evidence of ability, relinquished the idea of competing for University honours, and at the appointed time, easily obtaining a place amongst the multitude, emerged, as we just now said, a Bachelor of Arts. This achievement was, we are disposed to think, praiseworthy rather than otherwise, and, at all events, left John Dangeley's reputation for the

possession of ordinary capacity, quite untouched.

No one can have read the preceding pages without recognising the truth of what has been already said, that the course of life at The Grange was monotonous. It was a dull and obscure sort of existence, such as many others lead besides the Dangeleys. This, as regarded the family at The Grange, was partly owing to their pride, and partly to their poverty—poverty, that is, by comparison with many of the families resident within visiting distance from themselves. The pride of the Dangeleys, though it might have been dulled by contact with business, was fed by family traditions. In some of the ancient histories describing in not very certain terms the incidents of Italian warfare, references to their ancestors are to be found, and quite recently there died at Rome a distant relative of the Dangeleys,

who, retaining the ancient name and correct mode of spelling it, had succeeded to the cardinalate.

The English branch of this important house, descended in a right line from the Counts d'Angeli, had at the Reformation embraced Protestantism, and had ceased to have any intercourse with the Catholic members of it. Nevertheless, in spite of reverses of fortune, of emigration, change of religion, and mixture with mercantile affairs, the sun of the Dangeleys had not sunk below the horizon, though it was much obscured.

CHAPTER III.

THE CHOICE OF A PROFESSION.

THE great hall or refectory at The Priory deserves a somewhat lengthy notice. It was not so long as the hall at Knowle, nor so lofty as that at Eltham or at Ightham Mote. But it was so well proportioned, that architects not unfrequently asked to be allowed to study its dimensions. Entering from the front door, directly opposite the spectator was noticeable an old stone archway, leading to many rooms and passages on the ground floor. In one of these apartments, now used as a kitchen, it was evident that doles of food and broken victuals had been made to mendicants. On the right

hand was a similar old stone archway, and through that, access had been obtained to what was in former times the buttery.

The refectory indeed in all its arrangements recalled the halls of colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, with some of which it was contemporaneous.

One innovation must be mentioned—a noble staircase, believed to have been added in the reign of Queen Anne. This was of dark oak; kept always in a state of dangerous and unimpeachable polish. From its first step out of the hall to the last into the attic, it was of equal width and similar ornamentation. Its balusters had been copied in many houses throughout England.

This is, however, a digression. It has been said that the proportions of this hall were admired. Professional architects had studied its details, and from it had obtained many valuable suggestions for the modern

antique residences at this date so much in vogue. An enthusiastic amateur architect, when paying a visit at The Priory, had even been known all of a sudden to ask for plummet and line, to investigate for himself some peculiarity of structure which he thought should be noted down. But without venturing into technical details as to this really noble hall, some idea of its general appearance may be conveyed, by saying that it was lighted by windows on its western side. Of such windows there were three: two of very moderate dimensions; the third lofty and wide, occupying the entire space of a recess at the north-west end of the hall. From this last-mentioned window often, in former ages, fell a flood of light on the cross table, at which sat the beneficed ecclesiastics, whilst the tables running down the length of the hall were in comparative gloom; for, as before said,

the windows were small; they were also near the roof. But notwithstanding their position, they, as well as the large and beautiful oriel window in the recess, were protected by strong bars of iron. The architecture of all was uniform; it was early Tudor.

The fire-place was fully nine feet wide. The Squire had been induced by Julia to permit the introduction therein of some elaborate dogs. They were considered to be in correct taste, and especially appropriate to this hall. But the Squire looked with contempt on all pseudo-antiques. He would point to the simple ornament on the wide arch of the fire-place—mantel-shelf there was none,—and would suggest that it should be copied exactly. It was of Kentish rag-stone, slightly arched, and carved with ears of wheat at the corners.

The roof of the hall was grand, the

beams of Spanish chestnut crossing each other so as to form symmetrical squares of some four feet in diameter. The mouldings of the beams were of bold and effective design. It had often been suggested that the squares formed by these beams should be coloured and spangled. But the Squire would "have none of these things." They remained, therefore, white-washed, much to the disgust probably of those who heap Pelion upon Ossa in the way of decorations, for reasons which may possibly be surmised.

The walls of the hall at The Priory were not altogether unadorned; upon them were hung exquisite specimens of the work of Grinling Gibbons; the Mr. Vernon of that day having been an intimate friend of the Lord Egremont, who was one of Gibbons' greatest patrons. There were observable also many specimens of foreign carving,

probably of a very early date. They were brought from Belgium by an uncle of Squire Vernon, one of the détenus who had been tempted abroad by the short peace, and had beguiled long years of exile by collecting whatever suited his fancy, relying on the receptive power of The Priory.

From amongst the furniture in this hall may be specified golden eagles which came from Italy, and chairs, of dates from Henry the Seventh downward; all very uncomfortable as Julia declared; there were tables, black with use and shining with the elbow grease of past generations. There were cabinets of various ages and sizes. One, a cupboard from Westmoreland, for storing the oaten cakes which constituted the principal food of those who sat at the long tables; another from Derbyshire; and a third, larger and more imposing, of which the Squire was very proud. He had purchased it in North-

umberland; his friends rather questioned its antiquity; indeed, great plate-glass doors, recently added and quite incongruous with the original design, gave it a modern appearance. It was placed opposite the door and windows of the hall, reflecting the evergreens and garden.

The floor of this hall was of marble, black and white, brought from Sicily, and laid down about the time of Queen Anne by foreign workmen. Connoisseurs, whose opinion is probably entitled to respect, said the flooring should have been of oak. Yet the effect of the marble was very charming.

George Vernon, who has been described as, or rather was supposed to be, the *fiancé* of Melanie Dangeley, and a relative of the Squire, was in fact his nephew and heir-at-law, only child of the Squire's younger brother. George, now about eight and twenty, had when quite young been left

an orphan, almost penniless, his father never having taken to any of those pursuits by which money is obtainable. Through the Squire's influence, George Vernon had been nominated to a clerkship in the bank at Errington of Messrs. Lester and Co., the head of which firm resided at West Woodham Court, distant a few miles only from The Priory.

George Vernon, although living in comfortable lodgings in the village, was a frequent, almost a daily visitor at The Priory, that is to say, he was much there during his leisure hours, when absent from The Grange. Melanie had not the slightest reason to be jealous on this account; nor was she so, for George and Julia were on the footing of brother and sister, and none other. Moreover, notwithstanding the village gossip, George Vernon had not made, nor would have been justified in doing so,

any proposal to Miss Dangeley, in regard to whom he was perfectly free and unfettered.

George Vernon was the Squire's heir-at-law, and marked out by common reputation as his testamentary heir. His age was about eight and twenty, his appearance prepossessing, his forehead broad and ample, his hair dark, his features regular; he would have been very handsome, had not an air of irresolution and indecision pervaded his countenance, marring in some measure Nature's handiwork, and detracting from the *primâ facie* nobility of his appearance. Weakness and irresolution of character are said to border on hypocrisy, which is a kind of fraud.

There was, moreover, a peculiarity about George Vernon—the traits and complexion of his countenance were subject to rapid change, which he would sometimes try to

hide by assuming an easy, unconstrained manner; this is a sign less of integrity, than of prudence and circumspection. Was he then essentially a man of the world, a pleasant companion rather than a faithful friend?

It has been said by a great physiognomist that "the art of dissimulation may be carried to such a degree that the most discerning man may be deceived by it," and certainly George Vernon was in the habit of feigning sentiments which were not altogether in accordance with his real ideas or practice. On any such occasion the mobility of his features was surprising, he seemed in some sort dexterously to mould and fashion them so as to assist most materially in causing the impression which he wanted to convey. As an actor on the mimic stage thus appeals to the audience for sympathy and applause, so George Vernon strove to gain his own

private ends, and promote his own personal advantage on the stage of life.

John Dangeley, it must be needless to say, was like George Vernon a constant visitor at The Priory—for who could live close to so fair a being as Julia Vernon without wishing to see and converse with her, and to feel the pressure of her gentle hand?

On an afternoon in the month of July, 187—, our two young friends were lounging in the hall of The Priory, when the drift of their conversation was as follows :

“Well, Master John,” said the elder of these youths to his junior, “what are your cogitations about? You seem rather serious just now.”

“I have been thinking,” said John Dangeley, “on a very important subject—the choice of a profession. You see I must enter into a profession, there is no

opening for me in trade. I can't get on to a stool as you do in a bank or in a merchant's office, and look forward to being a partner in the concern, with a modest £10,000 per annum. I can't see my way even to earning a bare livelihood as a business man; and besides all that, my mother would not let me be one. For you know, although our family is poor, it is proud."

"Well, then, admitted that you will not be a business man, but must be something, what shall that something be? Neither the military nor the naval profession would be suitable; for the latter, you are much too old; as regards the former, there is the money difficulty, for the regulation pay would, in any good regiment, have to be supplemented out of private means. You are far too antiquated for medical training; so that your choice must be between the Church and the Bar."

“You seem, my dear fellow, to be going on rather fast ; you have already ignored three professions, leaving me a choice between two ; but what if I should elect to be an artist, a poet, a novelist, or a *littérateur*, would your marvellous appreciation of things in general and particular advise me thereon ? I wait for a response. I think you are so very wise.” So said John Dangeley.

“There can be no doubt that poetic or artistic genius is usually developed in early childhood ; the art of criticising is acquired by study and education. You must observe, too, that a literary critic is sometimes one who, having himself egregiously and lamentably failed of success as an original writer, and being quite unfitted to attain it, nevertheless conceives that his special province is to instruct and edify mankind. I suppose, however, Master John, you do not seriously think of appearing before the public as an

artist, a poet, or a *littérateur*, so that business avocations being also set aside, the only choice does seem to lie between the Church as a profession and the Bar."

"Well, I suppose it comes to that. What saith my mentor on the subject?"

"The solution of this question may be difficult in theory, but is, I think, easy in practice, and must depend very much on your own convictions and self confidence. If you have a decided preference, be guided by it. No man, however, should take the ordination vows" (and here George Vernon assumed a very solemn look) "unless he means that his whole mind, that his whole life, shall be devoted to the work he is about to undertake. Is John Dangeley willing to make this sacrifice? To live in some obscure country village as a poor curate, or even as a vicar? Remember, the prizes offered in the church by such a career are very few

as compared with the competitors for them. No lawn sleeves for you, Master John, after your moderate, though, of course, highly respectable academical career. No——”

Here the other interposed,

“You don’t seem in a very complimentary humour to-day. I should have thought you might, at all events, have let me subside into a comfortable prebendal stall or fat deanery. However, I am pretty much of your opinion again; so now, I pray thee, discourse upon the Bar.”

“As regards that profession, I have had some special means of knowledge. There has been a good deal said and much written in a tumid style about it—the lofty aims which those who follow it should have in view, about ambition, and so forth; but, believe me, success in this calling, as in any other, may be obtained in either of two ways—by honourable conduct or by dis-

honourable practices. Some certainly seem to ride on the crest of the wave, quite unsoiled by calumny, to high positions, whilst others, who never greatly distinguish themselves, are as certainly persecuted unceasingly with envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. And even some not very formidable as practitioners, but known in the literary world, are pursued by jealousy, the green-eyed monster. I do not profess to know much of the rivalry between members of the medical profession; it must be great, if it exceeds that between members of the Bar."

"A pleasant look-out, indeed. Perhaps after all I had better be a gentleman at large—a gentleman of limited means, and without occupation." Said John Dangeley.

"I can thus far offer consolation. You have good health, a sound constitution. You will therefore live over what would

kill another ; so suppose we say—forward to the Bar, and to the woolsack !”

“ I have heard you say that you once had a friend at the Bar. What did he do ? ”

“ I have had several friends at the Bar, and though I must caution you against deducing too much from particular cases, I will tell you something of what I know of the profession. Edward Robinson was a chum of mine in former times ; a better fellow never lived. His mother was a widow lady, possessing merely a life interest in a certain small property—nothing more. He had been always intended for the Bar, and having gone through the ordinary University curriculum, and incurred moderate tradesmen’s bills, which his mother could hardly afford to pay, Robinson entered at the Inner Temple, and shortly afterwards, having a little grounded himself in Blackstone’s Commentaries, paid his fee to a

special pleader, and had the run of his chambers. This licence might not seem much in return for his hundred guineas, paid down on the nail, and acknowledged by a squeeze of the hand ; but it was pretty much all that he got directly for his money, though being a clever fellow he extracted from the papers left at chambers, with the aid of senior pupils, a good deal.

“Cutting all this part of his educational career short, and saying nothing about his attendance at lectures, which, as then presided over, was unprofitable—they were, in fact, a mere sham—my friend Robinson was eventually called to the Bar—that is to say, he was allowed to practise, subject to those rules of etiquette—never put down in writing nor precisely ascertained—which can be twisted this way or that way according to the interests of those who may be called on to apply them. Rules thus capri-

ciously interpreted may grind the innocent to powder and may allow the greatest delinquent to escape.

“Nevertheless, my friend Robinson was called to the Bar, and then came the pinch, as his resources were very limited. At Quarter Sessions, held in his county town, though he had relatives on the Bench who were willing to give him a mild support, he was thrust aside by those more pushing than himself. At the assizes the course of things was much the same; at Westminster Hall, ditto; what then was to be done? Unfortunately for himself, Robinson got into the meshes of a very clever personage, who at one time had looked forward to high office under government, but had become so inextricably involved with Jews and money-lenders, that his professional career came abruptly and unfortunately to a close.

“My friend had doubtless got nominally a

few fees as junior counsel to this leader, but whether they were ever paid I do not know. He did write out some speeches about political cases for his friend and patron, which were said to be extremely good, but not having delivered them himself, he got little benefit thereby. The upshot of it all was, that one morning, when his laundress came to chambers, my poor friend Robinson was found with his throat cut. He had tried, but, as it turned out, ineffectually, to shake off the mortal coil, and eventually withdrew to the antipodes, where, after having been in decent practice, he departed this life.”

“Upon my word, George, you have a knack of throwing cold water over one—I almost return to the idea of not doing anything at all.”

“My dear fellow, you are too hasty; two or three instances such as I have mentioned, would not prove anything. I could add

another which came within my own personal knowledge. I could narrate the catastrophe, quite different in kind from that just mentioned, which befel another acquaintance—I will not say friend of mine. Ned Jones possessed considerable industry and perseverance, though he oscillated between the practice of two professions, which would seem to have nothing in common—the Church and the Bar. He commenced with the latter, and having been quite unsuccessful in that pursuit, and tiring of a sequence of briefless circuits, he abandoned the calling of a barrister, or rather ceased to consider himself such, and took the ordination vows. Moreover, he was licensed as curate in a fashionable West-end parish. I never heard that he acted otherwise than he should have done in this new capacity, and, though in needy circumstances, he might, with prudence, have maintained himself.

“However, Ned resolved to return to the Bar, and did so, it having, unfortunately for him, been determined that no law or established custom precluded him from taking this step. Now commenced his serious misfortunes. Again in a briefless condition—plunged gradually into abject penury and in want of the necessities of life, Ned Jones was exposed to a temptation which could not have assailed any one blessed with substantial fortune—he was tempted to the commission of crime, and succumbed to the temptation. Stern justice shortly overtook him, degrading punishment and expulsion from the Bar followed. He died broken-hearted.

“The unfortunate Jones, was, I believe, himself solely to blame for this miserable result, though I have heard that family disagreements caused his impecuniosity.

“Now though I don’t want to check your

enthusiasm—if you have any—for the Bar, cases such as I have mentioned show that there are misfortunes—using the most lenient term which can be used—incident to those enrolled at it, and I may just add in all seriousness, as we are upon the subject, that you should hardly look to a career at the Bar as calculated to fill the purse, though it may lead to a satisfactory and even honourable position. And let me further warn you that the study and practice of law—though they tend to strengthen the reasoning powers—tend to cramp and fetter the imagination.”

Here the conversation between the two young men ceased for the time, though by looking at the next chapter the reader will find that it was shortly afterwards resumed.

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN DANGELEY AND JULIA VERNON.

JOHN DANGELEY, notwithstanding his conversation with George Vernon, was far from decided as to the course of life which he should adopt; the conclusion, if there were any, arrived at by his astute friend, seemed to be rather negative than positive—seemed to point rather at what should not be attempted, than at what should be—seemed to indicate what should be avoided, rather than what should be aimed at and pursued.

After all that had been said, John Dangeley supposed that he must judge for himself; his mother could not advise him in a matter such as this. John had a vague

idea that the Civil Service would be more to his taste as a profession than the Bar; in it there were so many branches and departments to select from, surely some one might be found which would exactly suit him.

Clerkships under government are keenly sought after by country gentlemen for their younger sons—there could be nothing *infra dig.* in any such occupation, if common sense were employed in choosing it. It would be in no way incompatible with the position of the Dangeleys, derived though they were from the ancient *noblesse* of Italy. In family pride, almost inseparable from his descent, John Dangeley participated, but surely, he thought to himself, “there can be nothing derogatory in serving my adopted country; perhaps a political career may be opened to me, or the portals of the diplomatic service. Who knows but what I might

become an Ambassador, or the Postmaster-General; who knows but what I might become a Cabinet Minister, or even——” Here John Dangeley’s lucubrations were interrupted by the entrance of his former mentor, George Vernon.

“Well, my boy,” said the latter, “what is it to be?”

“I have been thinking, George, of the Civil Service as offering a likely chance.”

“I said nothing about the Civil Service, John, for this reason: to enter it, you must pass an examination, and I supposed that you were not over much inclined for hard work, especially after your literary labours at Cambridge. It does seem rather hard, you know, to have to begin again cramming so soon. It is true that an examination must be passed preliminary to admission to the Bar, but it is mild, and there is abundant time to prepare for it.”

"It seems odd that you should recommend the Bar as a profession after your strictures on it the other day," observed John.

"I don't exactly recommend it, but advancement in the Civil Service, after it has been fairly entered, does, I presume, very much depend on interest, which I fear you wholly lack. However, don't let me discourage you, only let me advise you to think the matter well over before committing yourself."

When George had given this sage but not very novel advice as to the course to be pursued by John, he took up his cap and asked John if he would "come for a smoke?" But it seemed rather early either for that or a game at billiards, and it must be remembered that it was out of the shooting season, and there was nothing to kill time out of doors. John declined going with George; he said he would go and look

for the Squire, but probably meant he would look for Julia.

The Squire and Julia generally spent their mornings before luncheon apart. Between luncheon and dinner, Julia either drove or walked with her uncle, as he preferred. Their evenings were passed together; and though they were hospitable, entertained frequently, and dined with their neighbours about twice monthly, there were still many evenings when they were *tête-à-tête*. Very different these, from the engagements of a young girl in a large family; and with a clan of relatives settled within visiting distance. Then the frequent interchange of visits, for luncheon and dinner, gives constant occupation, and much pleasant variety.

In the morning, Julia was generally alone; and it will readily be believed, that the hours and plans at The Priory were

almost as well known to The Grange people, as were their own. The Squire, moreover, was extremely punctual and exact; no erratic proceedings or changes of hours for him. Julia thought this a little dull, and agreed with a remark of Blanche Lester's, that when she ruled a household there should be, what Blanche declared to be quite compatible—order and yet uncertainty—rules, but occasionally deviations to prove them.

Blanche always maintained that it was very undesirable that every one should be able to calculate exactly on the engagements and occupations of each hour; she said it prevented originality; it prevented that ready turning aside to the interests of others, even when occupied with absorbing pursuits of one's own, which constitutes the greatest charm of character. In short, Blanche, who was six years Julia's senior,

very clever, and accustomed to manage the fittings in of wills and ways of a large household, was almost responsible for making Julia a little unhappy with her monotonous "level life," as one of Julia's village friends called it.

"Ah, Miss Vernon," said this good woman, occupied by daily duties in a prosperous shop, with a husband and many children, "Hepburn and me often say when we see you ride past with the Squire, 'they have no trials—they have such a level life—everything goes smooth with them.'"

To this Julia could have replied that a level life had its trials and difficulties, as great, perhaps as many, as another kind of life; its levelness, its monotony, constituted its trials. More ups and downs at seventeen, Julia thought, would be amusing.

Let us now follow John Dangeley to the morning-room at The Priory, where Julia,

having finished her letters for the first post, had taken up the *Times*, which the Squire usually sent from his library at this hour. John knocked at the door; and receiving the expected answer of "Come in," presented himself, saying (what a hypocrite he was!) "I thought Mr. Vernon had probably brought up the *Times*, and would allow me to see it. A man I know has just had his yacht wrecked off the Cromarty coast; and such things sometimes get into the newspapers. I do not see anything about it in the *Daily News*, nor the *Edinburgh Courant* which came in this morning."

"I have not observed any account of the loss of a yacht," replied Julia; "but will you not take the paper and look it more thoroughly through?"

So John, not very reluctantly, settled himself in one of the most comfortable of chairs, and occupied a few minutes in a search

for intelligence of his friend. There was nothing very exciting in the narrative. There had been no difficulty in lowering the boats ; and both the party and the crew had been saved, and were recruiting themselves at that very comfortable hotel, the "Gordon Arms" at Cromarty. When other news had been discussed, John relapsed into silence ; and Julia began to banter him about it, inquiring what very important matters could make him so grave. She looked on him as being rather in want of something to do, as she thought most men were on a summer's morning in a country-house ; unless they could take up a pencil and cover whatever lay near them in the way of blank paper, with specimen foliage, or groups of trees, or caricatures—by courtesy called likenesses—of friends. Or again, amateur photography was a delightful resource. There was generally so much

room for improvement in what was done as to afford inexhaustible occupation; and when the amateur artist's patience was worn out, there was the comforting assurance ready "that he would be more successful another day," if only the sitters would give him a chance, would kindly arrange the objects again, and so forth. John did do a little in the way of photography—but that was generally at The Grange—and on the present occasion he seemed quite contented to be idle.

"Were you and George looking at the ordnance map in the hall," said Julia, "and settling about that road through Maplescombe that we got set fast in the other day, with the heavy carriage as we drove to Heversham? I cannot think where we took the wrong turning—this new coachman of my uncle's does not seem quite so clever in understanding the very lucid directions so often

given, as Johnston was; the only thing that I cared about was that Boney took to gibbing a little up that terrible hill; and my uncle has sprained his shoulder—he was too energetic in seconding the coachman's efforts."

"Oh, I am very sorry to hear about Mr. Vernon's sprain, which we did not know of. We heard you were very late home; but the day was so exquisite we thought you had probably lingered in the woods, and been late in leaving Heversham. No, we were not examining the map," said John.

"You must know that my mother makes herself rather unhappy that I have not a decided call to any profession or duty in life; so I was talking about that to George—we have often discussed the subject before. I am afraid nothing new concerning it has been elicited. I wish, Julia, you would let me hear your ideas on the matter in question."

"I do not think I dare do such a thing as express an opinion about occupations and plans of life, were it not for the comforting assurance that advice, though asked, is never followed; and so one incurs no responsibility." Thus spoke Julia.

John was a little uncertain whether to take this all as quizzing and joke, or whether to urge Julia to express her opinion on the ground that it would have a special value for him; he rather feared this latter plan might occasion the abrupt close of the discussion, which would be an untoward result, so he tried again.

"Well now, seriously—without laughing at me for not being able to come to any decision—if you had to choose a plan of life for yourself, what would you do?"

"Oh," said Julia, "I have never had any doubt. If I were a man I should like to be a physician—not a surgeon—that is too awful,

but a physician. I should have a feeling and belief that I could be doing some good to people, helping them ; I always remember what the Rev. Frederick Robertson said—clergyman as he was—that ‘he felt happier in trying to help the bodies of people, than their souls.’ Now a physician would feel that helping their bodies was what he had to do ; but it is rather strange,” continued Julia, “that though I have always had a strong conviction of what I should like to be myself, I hardly know that I could recommend this to others. You for instance, being an only son, Mrs. Dangeley might not think the position what you ought to occupy, or she might think there were dangers, bodily and mentally, in the profession ; in short, I return to what I said at setting out, that though I should choose it for myself, I might not possibly recommend it to others.”

“Now, Julia,” said John, “all this is rather vague, and a long way from what I began with, viz. what would you recommend for me?”

“Then, simply, I must say I cannot advise on a subject which I am really not clever enough to grapple with.”

“But once again—I must say it—would you not care at all what I decided ‘to do with my life,’ as somebody says in a book.”

“Oh yes, I should care very much indeed; I should not like you to go out to Sierra Leone, or to Borneo, or even to India, and leave your poor mother all alone.”

“I see, Julia, you cannot take me seriously this morning. I am afraid I bore you, and I will go away and——”

“But you know,” interrupted Julia, “that is what I have just been telling you not to

do. But seriously—for I can be serious—you would not like any one to settle this question for you. You must decide it for yourself. And one thing I will promise, John—that I shall approve of anything you decide, if only it involves plenty of hard work; I have such great faith in that.”

“And is that all you will say, Julia? You cannot assume not to understand why I have asked you all this.”

“No, indeed, I will not; and I shall always be interested in what you do; only you know I must stay at home with my uncle, and you must go away and see the world; so we will not talk any more of it now, please. And here comes my uncle’s footstep on the stairs, so you can ask him.”

“What shall I ask him?” interrupted John.

“About a profession,” said Julia, very demurely; “and I can tell him that I am thinking of endeavouring to rival or eclipse Mrs. Dr. Gerard Fitz-Andrews.”

And as Mr. Vernon entered, Julia did inform him, that if she had to earn her daily bread, and had not a home with so good an uncle, she was beginning to think she should like to be a lady doctor. It seemed a higher branch of the profession than sick-nursing, which, though a rage of the day, had never had any attractions in Julia’s imagination.

Here the discussion of the matter ended for the present, as Mr. Vernon seemed to have an idea that John Dangeley need not decide in a hurry on any plan which would involve his leaving The Grange. So the gong sounding for luncheon, they all agreed to drop what the Squire called an unpleasant subject, and to arrange, instead

how Julia should go to the garden party at West Woodham Court. It was settled that as Julia would be having the large carriage, she would take The Grange people over with her.

CHAPTER V.

AN INCIDENT IN GEORGE VERNON'S EARLY LIFE.

GEORGE VERNON became an orphan at a very early age, and when in his twenty-second year was taken as a kind of junior clerk by a projected Railway Company, known as the Direct Continental Railway Company, the promoters of which were highly respectable.

George Vernon, besides assisting in the daily routine of business, which of course necessitated the strictest adherence to honesty and regularity, was at certain times employed to help in the Secretary's office, and under his eye in other ways.

In either of these employments it was possible to defraud the Company, and it was quite probable that deceitful practices affecting their interests might be carried on without discovery for a long time.

During the earlier period of his employment, George Vernon lived in respectable lodgings in Featherstone Buildings, Holborn. They had long been tenanted by city employés, and were then in part occupied by one Richard, or, as he was invariably called by his comrades, Dick Turpington. He was Secretary to the Railway Company, was older by seven or eight years than George Vernon, and had acquired considerable knowledge of life—of the world—which George almost wholly lacked. At these respective ages the influence of the older over the younger is very great, and when to the weight of years is added that of experience, a vast result for good or evil may ensue.

Living thus very much together, not merely at the Company's offices, but elsewhere, when free and social intercourse was more possible, impressions were easily made on George Vernon by his companion, or we might say friend, for the two became very intimate, which afterwards might not be effaceable without difficulty.

At the time spoken of, George Vernon lived on the modest salary vouchsafed him by the Company, supplemented by a small allowance from the Squire. The income derivable from these sources barely sufficed for subsistence, and certainly would not have enabled him to indulge in the frivolities and extravagances of London life. He had not, when first acquainted with Dick Turpington, attempted to do so, but had led a quiet and prudent life, after a fashion suited to his means, and without any particular feeling of discontent. George

soon found, however, that his friend Dick was not at all in accord with this state of things. He was much out in the evening, either at the theatre, billiard room, or casino; and whenever he could get a holiday, he resorted to places of amusement—sometimes to the race-course, sometimes to a sculling match, sometimes to the Crystal Palace.

George Vernon knew pretty nearly what the salary of his superior was—he had in fact looked forward to obtaining such a position himself, and marvelled not a little how Dick's expenditure was compatible with it. George concluded that Dick must have property of his own, to meet his outgoings. Upon this point George was afterwards undeceived, for Dick was as poor as a rat; he was, if the truth be told, heavily in debt.

Before a Company for carrying out expen-

sive works is formed, and set agoing, it is of course necessary to "raise the wind," which may be done by the issue of what are styled scrip certificates, entitling bearers, or perhaps allottees, to shares in the concern when formed. The scrip is printed in books not unlike cheque books, and each slip requires the signatures of two or more of the directors, and the counter-signature of the secretary, before it is complete and valid. The scrip is signed at board meetings by the directors, and handed to the secretary for his counter-signature when needed.

The practice touching the issue of scrip doubtless varies in different Companies, but has often been such as stated. It is dangerous, and renders it easy for the secretary, if fraudulently inclined, to issue spurious scrip for his individual benefit. Of course this might be prevented by due and constant vigilance, but the directors of Companies,

especially in their initial stage, are usually absorbed in business pursuits of their own, and do not devote much time to any one of them. This is very wrong, but probably will not be mended by protesting against it. Still something is being done in this direction. A member of parliament, for example, being a director of two Railway Companies, has been deemed on that ground unfitted for retaining his seat at a third board, it being supposed that however vast his capacity, and however flexible his intellect, there must be limits assignable, within which only they can be advantageously applied.

In Featherstone Buildings, George Vernon occupied apartments on the second floor, the principal suite being tenanted by Mr. Richard Turpington. On rare occasions, when the latter was not disporting himself according to his wont, he would ask George to smoke

or sup with him, and then long talk turned upon this, that, and every other subject.

“George,” he said one evening, “you must lead a very dull life here. Why, you never go out, man. What’s the matter with you?”

“I’ll tell you why I don’t go out,” responded George Vernon—“because I can’t afford it.”

“Pooh!” said the other, “money is not so difficult to get as you perhaps think. When you have been as long as I have in the world, you’ll know better.”

“Well, at present I don’t know any better than I say, and I know I can’t go out larking, or whatever you call it, to the theatre, and so forth.”

“There is rare fun to be had there, and at other places I could take you to.”

“It’s of no use talking like that,” said George Vernon; “one cannot go to the

theatre without spending money, nor to your favourite casino, about which I have heard you speak. A fellow cannot live properly, you know, upon what I get from this beggarly Company."

"Don't abuse what you earn your bread by. Give another twist to the screw first."

"You speak rather enigmatically," said George.

"Well, then, I will be more plain. I can get out of this concern a trifle more than my salary, you see, and so might you, if you tried."

"I dare say," replied George, "that you have commissions and perquisites, which I have not."

"No commissions or perquisites for me, I can tell you. The money has to be picked up some other way."

"I suppose," returned George, "you refer to speculations on the Stock Exchange.

I have no money to speculate with, and know nothing about them."

"Well," said Dick, "you are getting nearer the point now, but have not quite hit it. The scrip of our Company does not go up and down in the market like that of many Companies. It is very stationary in price, and usually something below par. There is not much to be made by speculating in such a security. When shares 'go up like sky-rockets, and come down like their sticks,' as I have heard said, they're the things to make money out of."

"You speak," responded George, "as an astrologer might do. I can't make head or tail of what you say."

"Can you keep a secret, George? I do sometimes sell our scrip on the Stock Exchange, but I don't buy it there; I get it for nothing, and so I make a tidy profit out of it."

"I think," said the other, "that I understand you now."

"You must be muddle-headed if you don't," said Dick Turpington, with a half-defiant look. "What say you to sharing in this enterprise?"

"Not without full consideration and time for reflection," said George.

"Well, of course a chap ought to think before he leaps; but mind, 'honour bright' as between us."

"It shall be so," said George Vernon, and thus the talk terminated.

A board meeting of the Railway Company was fixed for the day next but one after the foregoing conversation, and it was then evident from the *agenda* placed before the chairman, that business of importance was to be discussed. There was one item in the list especially which threatened to occupy much time—the comparing of scrip issued by

the Company as per Secretary's statement with the counterfoils in the scrip-books. These, of course, ought to tally exactly, and must do so when all is right.

The directors on this occasion mustered in great force, and when preliminary matters had been disposed of, proceeded to the checking of accounts, and of the scrip professedly issued by the Company. A holder of genuine scrip would be entitled to shares in the concern when completely formed, and to be put on the register of shareholders, consequently this process of checking the scrip was of primary importance.

When the investigation had been carried on for some time without anything extraordinary occurring, a director addressing the Chairman said—

“This, Mr. Chairman, is scrip purchased on the Stock Exchange by a relative of

mine. I have brought it here because it bears what I believe to be an unusual mark ; it bears on the back what looks like a very small letter K, accompanied by the figure 4. When a letter is used on our scrip in separate books, it never is so, I think, on more than three, and it is printed on the face, not on the back of the scrip. What is the meaning of this irregularity ?”

“ The Secretary,” said the Chairman, turning to him, “ will no doubt be able to explain this matter. The practice certainly has been such as my friend has stated.”

The Secretary, thus appealed to, after examining the scrip seemed rather flustered. “ No one,” he said, “ has ever been authorised to print the scrip in this form. The letter and figure 4 must have been stamped in after the scrip had been signed and countersigned. How this has happened I cannot conceive.”

"We must try then to quicken your memory," said the Chairman. He rang his handbell, whereupon the room door opened, and a policeman appeared upon 'the scene. He was accompanied by another person. That other person was the printer of the scrip.

"Mr. Turpington," said the Chairman to the Secretary, "we think we know the game which you have been playing. You have been caught when perhaps you little expected it. This gentleman," he added, pointing to the printer, "will tell you all about it."

There was no need for that, however—Dick Turpington was paralysed, acknowledged his guilt in surreptitiously issuing the Company's scrip and pocketing the proceeds, and thereupon was taken into custody by the constable, on the charge of fraud.

The trap had been thus laid. For some time past an over-issue of scrip of the Direct Continental Railway Company had been suspected, and though no circumstance pointed directly to any one as the culprit, it was natural to presume that the Secretary having special charge of, and access to the scrip, must in some way be implicated in and cognisant of the fraud. The directors therefore determined to have scrip printed, bearing on the back a private mark, so placed as to be likely to escape notice; this mark being put on scrip which the Secretary had not been authorised to issue, nor to countersign, though it was signed by the proper number of directors in the usual way. Of course if scrip thus marked were found in circulation, the misdoer would stand confest.

No suspicion attached as against George Vernon in connection with this affair, though

it may perhaps have been fortunate that so little time was given him for reflecting on the proposal made to him by Turpington, and none at all for actively participating in the fraud.

Whether or not George Vernon was likely to have been ensnared by his adroit companion, can only be guessed by reference to his conduct as subsequently put before the reader. Perhaps, however, he would not have been led astray, for ordinary prudence might have suggested that the stake to be played for was indeed small by comparison with the risk to be incurred; since cheating, after this particular fashion, could not be carried on to any great extent without discovery, and George Vernon could scarcely have overlooked the danger resulting from having an accomplice with the extravagant tastes and habits of Richard Turpington.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GARDEN PARTY.

It had been arranged that Julia was to take The Grange people over to West Woodham Court for the garden party ; the Dangeleys were to return home in the evening, but Julia was to remain at The Court for a few days. Her visits to this house were always pleasant : it seemed so cheery and full of people as contrasted with her own home. Here she found assembled almost all the Lester family. Mr. and Mrs. Lester, and the two oldest girls, had been in town for a short season. The distance of West Woodham Court from town was too great to allow of even a very moderate

amount of gaiety for the young people, so they had had a month only in town—had been to one drawing-room, some balls, some concerts, and many exhibitions, and were now returned for the rest of the year. There were too many little ones growing up, for Mr. and Mrs. Lester, on economical grounds, to think it wise to be much away from West Woodham Court. The oldest son was in India, but the second, Reginald, was at home from Oxford for the long vacation; talking indeed of a visit to Norway, Switzerland, or even the United States, with some friends who had a big yacht.

But for the present he was at home, enlightening the circle on various matters with regard to which he considered them in a state of dense ignorance; and he felt considerable excitement about this visit of Julia's. A garden party between the discreet hours of four and seven, if even the

grounds be very extensive, is by no means so favourable for *tête-à-tête*, and prolonged conversations, as were the old-fashioned pic-nics.

The return from a pic-nic in countries where the guests are collected from a wide district, and where the roads are hilly and bad, is apt to be thrown to that part of the day when the long twilight and after-glow must have an influence even on the unimaginative and unpoetic. But it is difficult to describe the great charm of the garden party so much in vogue at the present time.

A garden party seems hardly calculated to promote sociability; for little conversation occurs without introduction or previous acquaintance. Neither do various games form a very important element in the affair. If, indeed, there is a regular archery field and Archery Club, that does occupy a large

number of the assembled party ; but in other amusements, sometimes not more than a dozen people may be found actively engaged, and as many more interested in watching them. Garden parties do, however, seem to supply a want of the day : one modern philanthropist declares, that whilst all sorts of amusements are provided for the humble and hard-worked classes, no attractive out-of-door entertainment is provided for the upper middle-class. It is possible that some few of the visitors at West Woodham Court had more lovely grounds of their own, and some might have as lovely gardens, but amongst the two or three hundred guests there was, probably, many a one to whom the sights, scents, and sounds about him, afforded real refreshment. Any such gathering may, therefore, be looked on as a graceful mode of extending to others the enjoyments of the more wealthy : a very modified

edition of the hospitality which used to be exercised weekly, about half a century ago, by many of the nobility, and which we now only know of as recorded in biographies and memoirs of a former time.

The landed proprietor, who, instead of "Trespassers will be prosecuted," caused to be affixed at the entrance of his very beautiful grounds, the notice "Persons are requested to pass this way," knew something of the pleasure of extending the enjoyments of his daily life to others; and even in a populous district, not very remote from London, had no reason to regret having issued this invitation!

Readings or recitals at garden parties appear to present very charming combinations of intellectual entertainment with the enjoyment of scenes of natural beauty, and to sedate middle-aged people are, no doubt, acceptable; but perhaps young persons feel

as though they were caught for a lecture un-awares, if invited to read, recite, or listen, when they only meant to be merry and at play.

Having said so much about garden parties generally, which form a feature of the day, and go so well with the formal arrangement of flower beds with their brilliant colouring, and the picturesque style of the dress of the later half of the nineteenth century—it is time to turn to the garden party at West Woodham Court.

It had been anticipated with much excitement by the two sisters, Blanche and Laura Lester. They had often discussed together the uncertainty of the weather—the question, should the flowers be gathered the night before for fear of the rain, or left until the morning, that they might be fresher? and though last, not least, it is fair to presume, that amongst the guests, many of whom they

hardly knew, there were some whom they cared very much to see. The land around The Court was beautifully undulating : *bien accidenté* as our neighbours say. The house stood on high ground, which fell away from it and rose again so quickly, as to give the idea that in ages long gone by, its site must have been an island with streams rushing rapidly about it. The country, however, where The Court was situated was rather wanting in what has been called "the eye of the landscape,"—there was no river near. At West Woodham, one could only believe such a thing used to be. But other natural beauties were great ; oaks and birches clinging to the sides of the slopes, with stately cedars on their summits, and magnificent Scotch firs, protecting the house and making its appearance very striking.

The Park abounded in associations with the remote past; vallums, fosses, significant

of British and Roman warfare, and in more recent historical memories of politicians, statesmen, historians, and philanthropists. So, this was charming ground for a garden party.

The day itself was everything that could be wished ; there had been rain ; there had been thunder which cleared the air ; and the afternoon was exquisite and bright, as it so often is after such a disturbance of the elements. Mrs. Dangeley came over in Squire Vernon's carriage, as had been arranged, rather early to the Court ; and with her, Melanie and John. It is difficult to speak of Mrs. Dangeley, who was a middle-aged lady, in the ordinary way of describing features and style, but there was that about her which immediately attracted one. This was not so much owing to her carriage—though that was very dignified—but it was because she possessed—

“That sweet attractive kind of grace,
A full assurance given by looks ;
Continual comforts in a face,
The lineaments of gospel books.”

Mrs. Dangeley attracted, moreover, by the extreme gentleness of her voice. These charms combined, made the young feel that they could confide in her, and tell her everything ; and made older persons wonder, or possibly cease to wonder, how everybody seemed to want to know Mrs. Dangeley.

It can be easily believed that such a friend had been an unspeakable comfort and advantage to the motherless Julia. But Mrs. Dangeley's part had been difficult to act, in her intercourse with the Squire's family.

Being such very near neighbours, it would have been impossible for the two families to avoid seeing a good deal of each other ; if they were to be at all acquainted.

It followed that they must know one another intimately. Yet Mrs. Dangeley had felt scrupulous about any matrimonial connexion being formed between her own and the Squire's family.

There had always been a tradition in the neighbourhood, that the reason why the Squire had not married, was that in early life he gave up wishes, very near his own heart, at the request of his mother, and in after years, though no one regretted more than she that her son should remain single, all endeavours on her part to bring about any alliance failed; and often did she repent—so rumour affirmed—that she had interfered with what it appeared would be the one attachment of her son's life. Probably, there was some foundation of truth in all this; and granted thus much, it is easy to understand how Mr. Vernon would be careful not to mar the happiness

of the young people, who stood to him almost in the place of children.

Blanche and Laura Lester were amongst those who had been told of John Dangeley's admiration of Julia ; he had not, however, yet ventured to engage and fix her affections, his own position in life being entirely unestablished and undecided ; and whatever were Julia's inmost feelings, no word upon this subject had passed her lips, even to her young friends at The Court. Who, besides loving her very dearly, had invested her with a sort of halo of romance ; as they thought of her life, so different from theirs, in her old home with her old uncle.

The object which Blanche and Laura had most set their hearts on at present, was the having Julia for a sister-in-law. They knew very well why Reginald had stayed at home, instead of going off to some mountain climbing, or out-of-the-way

fishing; and they rejoiced at the Squire's decision to spare Julia to them for a few days.

Laura, who was Reginald's special sister, Blanche being the confidante of Walter, now away with his regiment in India, determined to observe very closely the manner of Julia towards John Dangeley on Friday. Laura was beginning to fear lest her wishes might have coloured what she had said to her brother about Julia; and by what she observed, she meant to be guided as to how she should advise her brother when he asked her counsel, as was his wont.

The Lesters had come to know the Dangeleys from meeting them at The Priory, and they liked them, in a way; but most of all they liked Mrs. Dangeley. Laura did not think John Dangeley half so nice as Reggie. She often wondered whether propinquity, which sometimes helps so

much, and sometimes seems to hinder so much, was going to favour John Dangeley's claims, in preference to her brother's.

No one ever thought or spoke much of George Vernon; his daily life, except as a clerk at the Bank, was not much known to the Lesters; and it was the rule at The Court to care most for people "that one knows everything about." Of course the girls, having had two seasons in town, were aware that meteors flash across the social hemisphere and dazzle the world, leaving it when they disappear, quite in ignorance of whence they came; and in equal or greater uncertainty as to whither they are tending.

There are no doubt girls, and not a few, with whom this sort of absence of definite knowledge lends an additional charm and interest to the hero of the season; but Blanche and Laura were rather matter-of-

fact little persons, and no special halo was thrown over George Vernon.

As regards Melanie it was different ; this kind of uncertainty had to her a charm of itself ; and when it came to the point that information was confided by an individual to her ear alone—when the history of the past, and the aspirations for the future were communicated to her alone—and for them was claimed her sympathy alone, it seemed to Melanie as if the dream of her life was realised.

George Vernon was of the house party at The Court for the two or three days, which included the Garden Party and Sunday. The Dangeleys were to return home, as has been said, on the Friday evening. Melanie's thoughts turned most frequently towards George—how much of that afternoon she might possibly be able to pass with him. It happens, however, that

things very seldom turn out as anticipated or planned.

Archery, with its strict lines kept till all the arrows are shot, and lawn tennis, with the world looking on to try to understand a little about this, still rather new, game, do not afford many opportunities for conversation of special interest. Blanche cared for archery, which she had practised a good deal, and took that part of the arrangements into her hands; and Laura was an adept at lawn tennis, had an apron in crewel work, and some specially dainty way of arranging her toilette with its long train, so that she could be very active with safety.

Their brothers—one being now actually away, and the other but little at home—had seemed always to leave these matters to the girls, who knew everybody, who knew what everyone could play, and who would like to

play with whom. And the tact of Blanche and Laura was seldom at fault, and was regulated by that most safe of all rules—that they were always planning for other people's pleasure, without thinking of their own; which seemed, however, to follow as a matter of course their thoughtful arrangements.

It may perhaps be allowable to describe a little the dresses of the party. This passage may and probably will be skipped by many; but remembering how anxious people seem to be for information on matters of taste, or art, with a view to illustrations, or even to costumes for fancy balls; to know, in short, about the dresses of eighty or a hundred years ago; is it not reasonable to imagine that the same anxious desire for knowledge on the same subjects may be felt eighty or a hundred years hence, and then might not this chapter supply a want of our descendants?

We will first speak of male costume, because it is so quickly disposed of. There is now a slight departure from "those execrable round hats," which Leslie the painter said "almost precluded any modern out-of-door subject from being painted," but regulation chimney-pots still outnumber the soft felt, and knickerbockers are never seen at a garden party, scarcely even fancy tweeds, so that it would be impossible to spend more lines on the dress of the male element of the party.

The difficulty, on the other hand, as regards ladies' dress, lies in an entirely opposite direction, and so great is the *embarras de richesses*, that perhaps a description of our two heroines, and their two friends, may be taken as giving some faint idea of the subject generally.

It can hardly be said that Melanie's adoption of the fashion of the day, in a dress of

pale buff, and a hat with buttercups and scarlet poppies, though justified (as it is considered) by her olive complexion, and blue-black hair, made a very attractive *ensemble*—striking, very striking, though it was—but Julia's shimmering white dress with blue loops, and ties everywhere; with rather a high hat, and shady brim, trimmed with daisies and forget-me-nots, seemed exactly to suit her; and to be just what an artist might have chosen, irrespective of fashion.

For Blanche and Laura it is enough to say, that each, according to her fancy, was attired in the pale, soft materials so much affected; that each had a high-crowned hat, with the flowers that "went best" with her *tout ensemble*; and that all four of these youthful ladies succeeded in what was no doubt the object of their desire, looking rather like Maypoles draped.

Such being their attire, they were thus distributed: Julia had promised John Dangeley, before she left home, that she would play with him at lawn tennis, to see if he had made any progress since they had last played together; and the other pair were supplied by Reginald Lester and a cousin in the house, Rosalind Graham. It cannot be said that much interest attached to this game, either as regarded players or lookers-on; but we may mention that Reginald thought John Dangeley "a real awkward fellow," from which it may possibly be inferred that some faint gleam of what Laura believed to be the state of the case, was dawning upon him.

"Instead of playing any more just now when the sun is so burning hot," said Blanche, "who will like to go to the shade for fruit or ices, or who would like to go with Laura by the moss walk, where it is

always cool under the yews, to the Belvedere? You see into several different counties from it, and can spy out I don't know how many churches; and the oak spreads its branches so far, and the foliage is this year so thick, that it cannot be hot there; and we shall find seats, fruits, and ices, in the shade."

So the party broken up into twos and threes—"scattered well" into the outlying parts of the grounds; and these groups of twos and threes—the former so much the better—added to the picturesque effect of the scene, whilst contriving their own enjoyment.

"Do you care for all this?" said George Vernon to Melanie.

"It seems rather objectless," she replied. "But if it is allowable to go off for one's pleasure, then I do think it is enjoyable. I have always a sort of misgiving that one is expected to keep by other people and try to

amuse them, and that it is not thought right to walk away."

"To-day, however," replied George, "it seems to me there are such crowds that no two people can be missed. We might take that path to the right, and come out again on the tea-table party near the sun-dial; and neither the people we leave, nor those we join, can tell how long we have taken for the journey between the two points."

They decided, therefore, to set out on this journey of indefinite length; and having started them, we will see what became of the rest.

"Do you not think," said Laura to her friends, when they had—owing to the wonderful clear shining after rain—seen an unusual number of churches, spires, lines of white smoke, showing where "hidden ran the iron road," "this would be a charming place for a reading party? We might

stay for an hour here, and no one would disturb us. Reggie, have not you, in your pocket, either Tennyson or Matthew Arnold? You might select some short poem for recitation—we would promise to be very quiet—and it would be practice for you, and give you confidence; and you might recite on a grand scale at the next garden party you go to, instead of engaging Mr. Rantum.”

“Thank you for the suggestion, Laury. I have not, however, any book with me, but it would be a charming innovation if fellows were required to recite something; and in these days, when ladies seem to be expected to do everything for us better than we can ourselves, if it came to be understood that they also would recite, I feel sure everyone would consider that also a delightful innovation. What do you think about this, Julia?”

“I know very well that I should much enjoy being a listener, but as to being a reciter, I am not so sure ; besides, I do not quite know how far it is considered proper for this little party to isolate itself from the general company, otherwise I think we might have a delightful sort of game of capping verses, or make it a kind of *vivá voce* ‘notes and queries.’”

“Do you mean discussing difficult passages of Shakspeare or Keble?” asked Laura; “that seems to me to come rather under the head of hard work.”

“I fancy,” said John Dangeley, “Miss Vernon means, rather, that she would like to have a sort of reference court, where one might be spared a great deal of trouble—for instance, by being told where is to be found a not well-known quotation which will keep running in one’s head.”

“Yes,” said Julia, “that was the kind of

thing I meant, only I should not venture to say how I forget where even well-known passages occur, such as 'Life would be endurable without its amusements;' 'Truth is great, and will prevail;' or 'Rest is not quieting;' and I wonder who can tell me where occurs this passage, which some one said the other day exactly described the lawn at The Priory—'Some wet bird-haunted English lawn?'"

About these quotations no one seemed at all sure; so that at last, laughing over some very improbable suggestions, and questioning and deliberating about others more likely, the party began to walk back from the Belvedere; found lawn tennis and archery still going on, though showing a tendency to wind up; saw diminished piles of strawberries and grapes; heard carriages being called; felt that out-of-door amusements were drawing to a close, and that with

wonderful punctuality, all the house party would be expected to sit down to a cold collation—a dinner so called—at eight o'clock, and thus the eventful day came to a close.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SCHOOL TREAT.

NEXT day was Saturday; and it was the plan at West Woodham Court to have the school treat the day after the garden party; partly because the place was always considered to look its best just then, and partly because it is nice to remember all one's neighbours. For this entertainment the young men of the house party were pressed into the service, and could help at something; if not at the tea drinking, which was felt to be women's work, they could join in cricket and football with the boys. It was not easy to find a level green for these games at The Court, so very sloping was

the ground, but a field was at last selected to do duty.

The girls were in a most delightful walnut orchard, and the light falling on the dresses and active movements of the many little figures, made a kind of kaleidoscope picture, for ever varying, and always pretty. School treats are now so much a matter of routine, that it would be useless to describe at length this special one. It may be taken as read, like the Royal speeches at the laying of foundation stones, and so forth. This was perhaps better than most such gatherings, owing to the surroundings of country, and the number of young visitors in the house; the day moreover was brilliant, without being overpoweringly hot. Instead, however, of going over such well-trodden ground as the school-party, we will pass from Saturday to Sunday, for Sunday at West Woodham Court had attractions of its

own. It was hardly a day of rest—in that sense the Sunday of former days has passed away. Everybody now seems to work hard on Sunday; which was a very happy day at West Woodham Court. It did not begin with a late breakfast, but breakfast was always ready at the same hour as on other days—no fear that the day would be too long for its duties and its pleasures. Of course Sunday-school teaching was remembered, and as the small people were expected to be extra restless or drowsy, according to the nature of the creature, after the games of the evening before, it was a matter of request from Blanche and Laura that their father would look in and ask a child here and there some unexpected question; or tell some special fact which he remembered connected with his travels in countries touched on in their Bible lessons. Then, though Blanche and Laura would gladly have rested in the

afternoon after their recent fatigues, there were walks to be taken with cousins, or friends, who, perhaps living in London, and engaged all the week, could not, on other days, enjoy woods and fields such as those at West Woodham Court.

The church was in the park, and the clergyman was young, strong, and active, and had "no end" of cups for rowing and athletic sports. He worked hard in every sense—cricket and football with his parishioners in summer evenings, and service early, late, and at all hours; so that there was an opportunity for every one to attend at which and how many he or she liked, but no observations were ever made as to who went, or who stayed away. At West Woodham Court the rule was, after people came to years of discretion, that attendance at religious ordinances should be a "willing service." An uncle of Mrs. Lester, good

old Dean Taylor as he was called by the few who remembered him, used to say when explaining his objection to energetic persistent begging, that "the gifts of affection would lose their value if given on compulsion," and may we not say of gifts and services for the highest objects, that their purity and freshness would be tarnished and dimmed if they were the result of similar importunity? A favourite motto at The Court was, "Patience and gentleness are power."

Mr. Lester was not a fluent talker. His proclivities at Cambridge had been towards mathematics, and he had been called to the Bar, and followed that profession for a few years. But unexpectedly succeeding to an hereditary position in a great banking firm, he had left chambers and law books, and shortly after married. However, the effect of his training in exact sciences had not

been effaced from his mind; and he was a referee and arbitrator in many matters of taste and knowledge, implicitly trusted by his children.

As they sat under the cedar watching the fading light, and waiting for the moon, they began to ask their father about things which had puzzled them the evening before. "Who says 'It requires better eyes to see beauties than defects,' and who says that very sad thing that some one quoted, 'Next morning even the most glorious event of an individual life has lost that illumination of hope which fulfilment slays?' and then"—"Stay, my little girl,"—for it was one of the younger ones, who, having taken no part in entertaining people on Friday, had listened to everything, and remembered much—"Stay, my little girl," said Mr. Lester, "it is hardly fair to put me through a string of questions like a catechism. Were all your

quotations as grave and serious on Friday, as those Emily has treasured up as a Sunday-evening puzzle for me?"

"No, indeed," replied Laura, "almost all our puzzles were about poetical quotations; you know Julia always says she cannot remember a single line, and yet she retains the sense and leading ideas of volumes of poetry. But we really took quite a wide field in our recollections."

"But now we have had enough of catechism and sermon, and suppose that without going in to the piano or harmonium, you sing one or two hymns. Reggie's voice, which we so seldom hear, ought to be as good as any piano for a bass. Why, I do believe he has been asleep all this time!"

"Well, really papa," said Laura, "you must not be surprised. I believe he never once sat down yesterday after the boys came until they were gone."

"Why, that is nothing! When I was a volunteer I remember one day standing from ten in the morning until ten at night, with only an interval of sitting still, during a short railway journey." Thus spoke Mr. Lester.

"Who says I have been asleep?" interposed Reggie. "I heard all you were talking about, and merely reserved my opinions."

"On what specially?" said Laura.

"Well, all that rather abstruse discussion about Danto's *Inferno*," replied Reggie.

"That may wait a little longer," said his father, "and perhaps will then have the charm of novelty, for I am not aware that any one has in this *séance* mentioned either Dante's *Inferno* or *Paradiso*! But for fear we any of us should become sleepy, let us speak of the plans of to-morrow morning. And by the bye, where is George Vernon?"

"Have you only just missed him? He settled last evening with our mother," said

Blanche, "that if he waked in time he would go over to see his uncle, as Julia was away; and that if he did not come back before dusk, he should go direct to town by an early train to-morrow morning, and meet you for the appointment you had with him at Lincoln's Inn."

A doubting smile, if such a phrase is allowable, might have been observed on Julia's face, at the announcement of George's reason for going to Errington, but she immediately observed, "I shall be delighted if my uncle has had some one with him. I never like to think of his being alone on Sunday."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TWO FARMERS.

FARMER HODGE lived at Orpen Farm, his own small freehold. It was a house which had one, and only one, feature in common with The Priory. From the farm-yard, which was never in a very tidy state, and about which roamed cattle, pigs, ducks, and the ordinary denizens of such a place, the front door opened straight into a hall or vestibule, the dimensions of which were very considerable, and the architecture of which, being Early English, was consistent with the tradition—for there were no title deeds to prove it—that this part of the building, at all events, had been erected in

the time of King John ; it was undoubtedly older than the corresponding portion of The Priory. A mansion had thus degenerated into a farm-house, of which other external details had nothing in particular to need description.

Down the length of the hall were ranged deal tables, perhaps replacing what had been of oak, at which the farm servants habitually took their meals. Here again was evidence of some desecration of the place.

The Kentish archæologist, indeed, is familiar with examples showing the transition spoken of, which he meets with in his local ramblings. Not only has many a stately edifice disappeared, leaving behind little or no trace of its existence, but many another has fallen from its ancient grandeur, and now exhibits in some obscure loft, some ill-conditioned barn or outhouse, the sole evidence of it. Such decadence is of course

due to various causes, of which one may be specified as applicable to Orpen Farm-house—the impossibility of adapting it to modern ideas of luxury, refinement, or even comfort—at least, the impossibility of doing so without profuse and extravagant expenditure. Small apartments, with low ceilings supported by unsightly beams, though very suitable for Farmer Hodge and his family, and not in any way objectionable to them, would in a higher social grade be incompatible alike with the practice of hospitality and with the enjoyment of ordinary domestic comfort.

We think, nevertheless, that many private mansions interesting to the antiquary might have been conserved with advantage to their respective owners, had but some little care and foresight been exercised, and some moderate outlay only been from time to time bestowed on them.

Farmer Hodge was esteemed a very worthy man, good-natured, may be, to a fault, and not over burthened with wit, though having quite enough for that sphere of life in which he moved. His wife was a pleasant, buxom dame, and his only child Mary was very pretty. She was Julia Vernon's humble friend and confidante, and if ever there was a fairy in human form it was she. Naive, sprightly, bright, cheery and equable in temperament, with light auburn hair, laughter-loving checks, and blue eyes.

Farmer Hodge, as may have been surmised, was not a farmer belonging to the second or even the third rank of cultivators of the soil; he had to work for himself and his family quite as hard, though not exactly in the same way, as any of his labourers.

Bounding Orpen Farm was another small freehold, occupied by an old bachelor who

bore no very good reputation in the neighbourhood—not at all on account of any proved deflection on his part from the right way, but rather because he was accounted too thrifty, over much inclined to drive hard bargains, looking ever after self, and, in two words, narrow-minded and stingy. His name was Lambert.

Farmer Lambert had amassed a considerable fortune, not altogether by farming, the extent of land which he held not being sufficient to render that possible, but partly by speculating in hops, and partly by accretion on the deaths of relatives. He was a shrewd observer, too, of the ups and downs of the corn market. He knew when to keep his wheat in stack, and when to have it threshed out and sold. He sometimes engaged in a deep venture, occasionally combining with two or three others, but more frequently single-handed, on the Corn

Exchange, and it was said that every now and then he had a book upon the Oaks or Derby; if this were so, it must have been when special information was given him by some stable-boy or jockey—a thing quite within the bounds of possibility, for Farmer Lambert was a successful horse breeder; he was assuredly too cautious a man to gamble after this fashion without the “tip.”

A squabble had arisen between these two farmers in our little village—Farmer Lambert and Farmer Hodge—respecting the boundary of each other’s land, the one claiming a ditch and fence girding his own premises; the other asserting that this fence had been wrongfully advanced out of its original position, to his individual detriment and the advantage of his neighbour. The contest grew hot, and went to the Assizes, where one of the litigants gave evidence of acts of ownership over the ditch, such as

cleaning of it out and throwing the mud on to his own land, whilst the other called witnesses long resident in the district to speak to the position, in times gone by, of the line of demarcation, and to show that it had been materially changed. The jury, giving credence to these latter witnesses, returned their verdict accordingly in favour of Farmer Lambert and against Farmer Hodge.

Out of this small affair deadly hostility arose. Nor, indeed, was it surprising that this should be so, for the unsuccessful litigant went out of court marked as a dishonest man, smarting under defeat, and saddled with costs which he could ill-afford to pay.

This event created much excitement in the village, and was scarcely likely to be overlooked by the Rev. Jabez Titmarsh, the Vicar, a worthy, excellent man, and

diligent as pastor, yet rather too fond of improving an occasion and lecturing his parishioners in regard to local incidents.

Accordingly, on the Sunday following the occurrence mentioned, the Vicar preached a sermon adapted, as he thought, to the existing state of things, selecting for his text part of verse 14, Deuteronomy xix., "Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmark." In commencing his discourse the preacher spoke persuasively of the beauty of truthfulness, the Christ-like character of candour as between friend and friend, the necessity for neighbourly forbearance.

"Fraud," he remarked, "is of various kinds, some being more dangerous and subtle than others. It is fraudulent to say one thing and to mean another; to affirm that as a fact about which one knows nothing, whether it be true or false; to mislead in any way. The grosser aspects of fraud

appear in theft, in obtaining surreptitiously that which does not rightly belong to one, and generally in misleading another. The species of fraud are numberless; this vice pervades large sections of society. The more unusual forms of it are the most dangerous, because it is difficult to guard against or anticipate them. The punishment of fraud must be apportioned here according to its dangerous tendency, hereafter according to the degree of depravity evidenced by it, viewed by the eye of perfect purity and wisdom.

“Fraud might seem a small matter to the petty shopkeeper, though in the sight of God it was not so; as between those who come into daily contact with each other it was especially reprehensible.”

The preacher traced out the usual consequences of deceit and fraud, and showed how injuriously they act upon the

moral perceptions of the person practising them.

The preacher spoke also of the punishment due hereafter to social perfidy; he spoke of hell.

The Vicar concluded his discourse with these words, "Yet how great soever is the sin spoken of, it may be cleansed and obliterated by repentance—it may be washed out through God's mercy by a change of heart—it may cease to contaminate the soul.

"When conscience is first awakened—when remorse for an evil deed is first aroused—the soul seems to be changed. Is it that some divine essence, long repudiated and ignored, has now possession of it—some spirit which has long been rejected and put aside, has at last entered it—some vital energy needed, has been given to it—some efflux from above has been breathed into

it? Or is the change effected by some process of mere reasoning—by some conviction gradually matured, which brings forth its fruit after the evil has been done? I know not—but repentance is a blessed thing. ‘There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth.’ ”

One person was present in that congregation to whose heart the preacher’s words went home. Farmer Hodge might very well suppose that the language used—though he was not able to understand it all—was directed against himself, and going out of church in no very pleasant frame of mind he encountered the Vicar, when the following brief colloquy ensued.

“Well, Sir,” he said, “why should an innocent man be run down in this way? One would think that all my neighbours were against me, though I have never done any harm to them, or to anyone. Is it quite

English-like to blacken a man's character after this fashion?"

"You cannot deny, my friend," replied the Vicar, mildly, "that at all events appearances are much against you. A jury of your fellow-countrymen have decided that the fence was wrongly placed where it is, and that must surely have been done by your orders—and how could you help knowing where the real boundary was?"

"If any one has been wronged in this matter," observed Farmer Hodge, "it is I, not Lambert; but the matter shall not stop where it is, and I beg, sir, you will not preach any more sermons against me and my family, who have been in this place a many years."

As the Vicar walked slowly homeward and communed with himself, he began to doubt whether he had, in truth, been justified in what he had said either in the pulpit

or to his parishioner, Farmer Hodge. There certainly was a possibility that Hodge was morally innocent in this affair, though legally answerable in respect of what had been the subject of the lawsuit. For the future it might be better to abstain from noticing so pointedly a matter entirely local, and about which different opinions were entertained. It was not his, the Vicar's, duty to sit in judgment upon anyone, still less to hold him up to the congregation at Errington Church as an example for avoidance.

Farmer Hodge went home meditating on the wrong which had been done him—the indignity to which he had been exposed; and if not thinking of revenge, thinking what he might best do to right himself.

That very evening Farmer Lambert was found dead. The corpse was lying on the side of a ditch within the limits of his own

land. There were no signs of a struggle; the death-blow had been dealt at once, the lethal instrument having been probably a bludgeon. The ground being dry, no foot-marks were visible on it. The money and valuables of deceased were undisturbed. A coroner's inquest was held upon the body, at which an open verdict was returned. No particle of proof of guilt was forthcoming against any one; yet that a ruthless homicide had been committed, most likely actuated by revenge, was unquestionable.

Notwithstanding Farmer Hodge's excellent character, and the liking generally felt for his family, suspicion in the first instance attached to him; it was, however, vague suspicion merely, which gradually died away. Thus matters stood, the police being entirely at fault. It seemed, indeed, that the well-worn saying, "Murder will

out," was in this instance to be falsified. It seemed so to human minds and understandings, but the Great Searcher of hearts knew otherwise.

CHAPTER IX.

DINNER AT THE PRIORY.

SOME few days after Farmer Lambert's death, Mr. Lester, who had been with Squire Vernon on magisterial business, was asked to stop to dinner at The Priory. Melanie Dangeley had come in, as she often did, for a talk with Julia, and a message having been sent over to The Grange, also arranged to stay for dinner. The afternoon was lovely—the evening still more so, and when dinner was served, with the Squire at the head of his table, the climax seemed to have been reached.

The dining-room of The Priory was about thirty feet long, and proportionately broad

—in size, therefore, by no means excessive. It was principally adorned with heraldic bearings, the shields and crests of the Vernons. Some of these were very interesting—arms all registered in the College, the pedigree of the family being unimpeachable. Amongst them were some curious augmentations of arms, where the family coat had been added to for divers achievements. To one of these augmentations, indeed, the Squire had always strongly objected; it had been granted by the Norroy King-at-Arms during the unsettled period of the Commonwealth, or, as it might be otherwise put, during the wars between the king and people, to an ancestor of the Vernons, in consideration of his defence of Chester Castle for the Parliament. The augmentation added in chief to the Vernon arms a sword and two keys, which were the arms of Chester Castle. The Squire, though

not a very strong politician, was opposed to everything which savoured of republicanism, and thought that the unhappy king was a real martyr. The obnoxious shield was allowed, however, to remain, for it was accompanied by the authentic grant of augmentation framed and glazed, setting forth at length the commissions and dignities accorded to his illustrious ancestor, and of these the Squire was not a little proud.

Other walls of this dining-room were embellished with the crests and interlacing cyphers of families with whom the Vernons had intermarried, and on brackets which lined the walls the choicest Chelsea, Bow and Derby vases were at intervals arrayed. When combined with the rarest flowers culled by the fair hands of Julia, the *tout ensemble* was very pleasing, and as mortals must dine in some visible locality, they

might have done worse than dine at Squire Vernon's.

The greatest objection which can be urged against an ordinary English dinner party, is the presence at it of a certain amount of formality and restraint. As regards culinary delicacies it is in general unimpeachable. Happily, however, it would here be quite out of place to offer any criticism on dinner parties, as the present gathering comprised four persons only, namely, the Squire and his friend Lester, with Julia and Melanie.

The Squire, when a friend or two, as now, dropped in to dinner, took pleasure in carving for his guests, and about this there was one peculiarity—he was a great talker, and sometimes whilst conversing with a guest he forgot that his business also was to carve; his knife and fork were on such an occasion often pendulous in mid air as he

delivered his views upon this subject or on that. The Squire was a skilful carver, having acquired that accomplishment when the *dîner à la Russe* was quite unknown. True it is that he considered himself rather an adept in the art, and would have been shocked to think that he was at all remiss in exercising it.

The Squire was separating the wing of a duck, which with green peas was to be transferred to the plate of Mr. Lester. "My dear sir," said he, and thereupon his knife and fork ceased to perform their functions, "we may be sure that Farmer Lambert was murdered, and most likely by one of those gipsy fellows who have been prowling about our lanes for some time past; an idle lot of vagabonds they are, and up to anything."

Having thus remarked, the Squire's knife and fork resumed their play, and his guest

Lester had some chance of getting his dinner.

Mr. Lester, however, did not quite agree with the Squire's views as mooted, and having through the intervention of the servant secured his duck and peas, which were by this time seasoned with champagne, proceeded to state the reason why.

"For my part I have never known that the gipsies do much harm. They may pilfer a little, and sometimes walk off with a fowl, but they are not addicted to crimes of violence. Certainly I shouldn't like a tethered horse of mine to be in their way if they wanted such an article, yet for all that I don't think they would commit murder. This looks to me like some act of private malice."

"I flatter myself," remarked the Squire, "that no one in Errington would do it. What say you, Julia?"

"No, indeed, uncle; I think no one here

would be so wicked, and to kill an old man like Lambert is such a cowardly thing too."

"I have little doubt," observed Mr. Lester, "that Lambert had his enemies; he was an old curmudgeon, and cared for little or nothing except getting money."

"At all events," said the Squire, "I never will believe, unless it's proved, that Farmer Hodge had anything to do with it, although the coincidence of his quarrel with Lambert was curious."

"The idea, that Mary's father committed murder!" added Julia.

Melanie had taken no part in this conversation, but now observed,—

"I have heard that old Mr. Lambert was a speculator. I have heard John say that he made much of his money by buying corn and hops, and holding them for an advance in price. I don't of course understand such

things. I know too that John has said he often bet on horse-racing."

"Such practices," said Mr. Lester, "might bring Lambert into bad company, but would hardly account for his being murdered. I understand that the police have no clue whatever as to the guilty person."

"No," said Mr. Vernon, "nor are likely to have, though I think Inspector Potter is a shrewd, knowing man. I am sorry," added the Squire, turning to Melanie, "that John could not come with you; perhaps he would have had some theories on the subject. It would be good practice for him, if he intends to be a criminal lawyer."

"He was extremely sorry not to be able to come with me," replied Melanie, "but I believe he explained in his note that he and George Vernon had promised to accompany Mr. Titmarsh to a meeting at Podger's Heath."

“Yes, he said so ; are they gone to read or to sing to the heathens?” said the Squire, who was rather faithless about plans for improving that miserable district.

“No,” said Melanie, “I believe it was about the balancing of accounts of the Cricket Club, and also to see how many of the young men and growing boys care about football. Young Titmarsh—so his sisters were telling me—was School House Captain of Quarters at Rugby—and George, and John, and he, were all agreeing that the rough play of football would be the best thing for working off the energies of Podger heathens.”

“Well then,” said the Squire, “we must do without any benefit of John’s suggestions, and let him enlighten his humbler friends.”

“He did say,” said Melanie, “that he did not think it clear that there was any murder ; perhaps it was manslaughter ; or

there might only have been a quarrel between old Lambert and some one else. But I wish he had been able to be here; and then he would have told you his views much better than I have done."

Having thus commented on the event of the day, the two girls retired to the drawing-room, and after tea, coffee, and a little music, Mr. Lester's carriage was announced, and Melanie was escorted by Squire Vernon to The Grange.

CHAPTER X.

MARY HODGE'S LOVERS.

MARY HODGE was courted by two young men in the village of Errington. Of these John Adams was the son of a well-to-do tradesman in the place, and acted as bailiff for the Squire, in which capacity he gave much satisfaction to his master, and received from him very handsome wages. It was, accordingly, quite natural that young Adams should think of matrimony, and amongst the likely maidens around, he found not one so agreeable to him as Farmer Hodge's charming daughter. Not only was she piquante and nice looking, but from her home life well fitted for that which he led and looked forward to. She had no

frivolous nor expensive tastes; her father did not aspire to be anything above an English yeoman, and Mary would make an admirable yeoman's wife. She was versed in the household duties incident to such a position, and was thoroughly qualified to perform them.

Although John Adams has been described as bailiff to the Squire, he was not head bailiff, who was a much older man. John Adams acted for the most part as wood-bailiff; it was his duty to mark trees here and there fit for felling, and as preliminary to this he had to measure with his eye, or, if necessary, to determine in the usual way their bulk and cubical contents; at this work he was very skilful.

At certain seasons also, young Adams assisted the game-keepers, especially in providing for the young pheasants when first taken to the coverts from their coops.

Nor did he hesitate occasionally to do the work of an under keeper or his assistant in digging out an ant-hill, and bringing its contents, eggs and insects, in a sack to the coops. From all this our friend derived much amusement, the tapping of the bird's bills upon the platters being to him a pleasant and artistic sound.

Squire Vernon was so liberal to his tenantry and servants, was so thoroughly respected and esteemed by them, that each in his employ was willing to do more than his strict work for his master's interest, and none grumbled or got sulky when asked to do so.

Nothing can be more satisfactory than the relation of master and servant upon this footing; each loves the other as we are told in Holy Writ that we should love one another; each is wishful to do more than he need do for the other.

John Adams' especial pleasure was at certain seasons of the year in helping the keepers to retain the pheasants in his master's woods. These birds are by nature ambulatory and wandering; they are not easily kept within bounds, they can only be so, where there are adjoining and rival coverts, by high feeding, thus holding out to them special inducements to remain *in situ*. With a view to effecting this object, John Adams would often in the autumnal and wintry months, whether in the early morning or after his regular duties were over for the day, be seen traversing the woods lying at the back of Errington Priory, his pockets filled with peas and barley, which he scattered along his path; on any such occasion he also inspected the stacks of cereals, which here and there had been placed for the birds to scratch and disport themselves in.

Sometimes, when thus engaged, John Adams had encountered Mary Hodge—the direct path from Orpen Farm to Errington village lying through Squire Vernon's woods—indeed some affirmed that from the quarter in which Hodge resided, there was a right of way, though not, of course, any right of straying therefrom, through the Errington woods. The point had never been raised during Squire Vernon's tenure; perhaps it might be so when some less popular proprietor was in possession of his estates. Let that be as it may, John Adams had encountered Mary Hodge on this very pathway through these woods, and with the feeling which existed in his mind, of admiration, or we may say of something very nearly akin to love, it can hardly be supposed that such meetings, when they occurred, were wholly unimproved by him.

Once in particular, on a glorious autumnal afternoon, these young persons had met and had exchanged words which seemed like the prelude to an engagement. Everything about them was in harmony with ideas of love—the wilderness of ferns, heather, and the smaller shrubs, interspersed with the most splendid of forest trees, up which the squirrels climbed, ever and anon the rabbits popping into and out of their holes—the carolling of birds—the cooing of the wood-pigeons—all this seemed quite in accordance with what, we may assume, was passing in the minds of John Adams and Mary Hodge. Each was thinking of the other. They had not previously spoken together so confidentially, and Adams's manner was so *empressée*, and, at the same time, so deferential to Mary, that it must have been appreciated by her.

On another occasion, the path which

Adams was following from some of the out-lying coverts, was met at a stile by one from The Priory, and then the combined path led through hop gardens towards the home of Mary Hodge, and that also of the parents of Adams.

With quick sight, Adams, from the top of the hill, observed a light active figure, which he thought he recognised, coming towards the stile. Under any circumstances Adams would probably have lingered, but now he did not hesitate a moment. The idea of a walk with Mary Hodge was delightful, and as the shades of evening were drawing on, and the height of the hops and hop-poles made the path appear very solitary, there was no doubt his escort would be approved of by Mary's parents.

As Mary drew near, she said, "It is difficult to remember, so very hot as it is, that

the summer is passing away, and that we are six weeks past the longest day."

Adams rejoined, "Though the walk to the farm is not long, I think your parents will be glad that you should not be alone."

"Indeed I have stayed much later at The Priory than I ought to have done. But Miss Vernon is always so kind that it is hard work to leave her."

"And then," rejoined John, "as she is so very much alone in that large house, it must, I should think, be pleasant to her to speak to some one young like herself."

"Well, you see, the habit grew in this way: when I was quite little I used to go to see my aunt, who was Miss Vernon's nurse; and we then played together, and I never thought of the difference in our positions. When, however, Miss Vernon had her English and German governesses, and

learnt so much that I did not understand anything about, I was afraid she would not care for talking to me. But it has never made any difference—she is just the same. To-night she wished to tell me how much the Squire and she had thought of my father, and all of us, during the late proceedings; and how sure they were that father would never wrong any one. I know they will like to hear that when I get home.”

Adams was not so clever and ready in expressing himself as Mary—he had not often the opportunity of speaking to those in a rank of life superior to his own—but deliberately and earnestly he said: “Almost every one I have spoken to, feels like the Squire and Miss Vernon; and I hope, Mary, it is some comfort to you to know how I feel about it. I trust you are not altogether indifferent to my sympathy.”

Here he paused, and Mary, more slowly than usual, and her colour deepening as she spoke, replied—

“Indeed, the kind opinion of our neighbours is very valuable at such a time, and I know you have always been considerate and thoughtful to my parents.”

“How could I be otherwise to any one belonging to you, Mary? I always hesitate to put myself forward, and fear to press upon you the knowledge of half that I feel; but just now it seems that I must tell you; and you will think over it some day, if you cannot promise me anything now.”

It was fortunate for Mary that the light had faded a good deal further into evening, so that John could not see her blushes; but the tone of her voice as she answered, “I shall never forget how kind you have always been to me,” encouraged him. They were now close to the farm, and he was further

pleased when, on getting to the house, Farmer Hodge came to the door, hearing footsteps, and said—

“Well, Mary, your mother and me was getting a little uneasy at your being rather late, but now we see who has taken care of you, we are satisfied.”

John would have been glad to be asked in for a further chat, but early hours, night and morning, were the rule at Orpen Farm; so, after a few more words about the weather and the hops, and as to when hop-picking would begin, he had to be satisfied with a cordial “Good night,” from Mrs. Hodge, “and thank you for walking home with our daughter.”

Mary Hodge’s other lover, Ned Davis, was in outward appearance prepossessing, but his heart was not altogether right. His father was a publican in Errington; and, although he was the only one there fully

licensed, his house could hardly be deemed respectable. Thus far, however, he had escaped magisterial censure. Tradesmen's clubs, no doubt very proper and well-conducted, met there on certain nights; and other meetings, faultless in their nature, were held there.

At other times, a very promiscuous and lawless assemblage congregated at "The Bells," comprising persons whose modes of living were not apparent—persons suspected, though not proved to be, poachers—persons who attended races, and were not over particular how they picked up money there, or, if they lost their bets, about paying them—persons who went "cadging" about for odd jobs, and might, possibly, when so engaged, lay hands on property which was not their own—persons who carried about packs of sham jewellery, which was, when practicable, passed off as genuine, at one fifth of

the price of the real, though thrice that of the spurious article—persons who shot at pigeon matches, and knew how to get trappers who could administer that artful squeeze to a pigeon when trapping him which makes a bet on the gun a certainty—persons who went about with thimbles and peas, hoping to circumvent the unwary.

This list of *vauriens* who sometimes congregated at "The Bells," might easily be amplified, yet as given it may suffice to show that the bar and parlour of our host were occasionally strangely filled. In many of such gatherings there Ned Davis took part. He was a very wiry, athletic man—at boxing or single-stick, at leaping the bar, whether on foot or horseback, at quoits or cricket, few could match him. It would have been well for Ned had he confined himself to these innocent diversions, and even then he must have put some control

on his temper, which was ungovernable and ungoverned.

Unhappily Ned Davis did not restrict himself to these amusements; his lot perhaps should have been that of a hunter over the prairies of Southern America—he ought to have ranged through the primeval forests of Western Canada or the States. There he would have done great things amongst the buffaloes, bears, and opossums, here his inclinations could not be so gratified, and therefore Ned Davis took to poaching, not exactly in the vulgar way in which that pursuit is usually carried on—he cared little about selling the game he killed or eating it himself, but he did like the pastime of getting it—a partridge, hare or pheasant, thus shot or snared, being for him priceless and superexcellent.

A main objection to poaching, irrespective of its being an infraction of the law,

has been often pointed out ; it is likely to lead to crimes of violence ; it brutalises the mind, and renders life a state of constant warfare with the constituted authorities. No blue book is needed to prove this, no lengthened magisterial experience need be appealed to ; the thing is admitted, yet no adequate remedy for the evil has been devised.

The poacher may be deemed to be an avowed enemy to the upper classes, and especially as in a state of antagonism with all squires, squireens, and landed proprietors in general. The game laws are to him an abomination ; animals clad in fur or feather, which roam at large and are not domesticated nor confined to one locality, are in his eyes the property of him who can first capture them. Thus is opened up a theory far too abstruse for discussion in these pages. It suffices for us to know

that Ned Davis was unhappily addicted to poaching, and that the practice of it led in his case to the usual results.

It might, perhaps, have been thought that Ned Davis, with his special propensities, had small chance of obtaining the hand of Mary Hodge, but he thought differently, and prosecuted his suit with much persistence.

Farmer Hodge was too kind-hearted a man to interfere actively in favour of either of the aspirants to his daughter's hand. He held that her feelings alone should decide the issue, though he might possibly have preferred the wealthier suitor had he known which he was. Being utterly in the dark upon this subject he remained strictly neutral in the matter, albeit Mrs. Hodge was strongly in favour of young Adams, and did not hesitate to say so.

"Well," said a neighbour to Farmer

Hodge, "so I hear that your daughter has got two young lads after her; can't you spare one of them for mine? Old Davis has got a good deal of brass, and old Adams is thought to have a mint of money."

"I can't say, neighbour, how that may be, but my girl must choose for herself, and God's blessing be on her and hers."

"Amen," responded the other; "only it does seem rather hard that your missie should keep both them young chaps at her feet, though she isn't bad looking neither."

Mrs. Hodge also delivered her views upon the subject to Widow Hale in this wise,—

"Our Mary," she said, "is a good child enough, but how she can keep that young Davis dangling after her I can't tell. If I had my will he shouldn't darken our doorway again—not he."

CHAPTER XI.

A CHAT ABOUT CHINA.

As appears from the conversation at the dinner-table of The Priory, reported in a preceding chapter, Julia Vernon had perfect faith in the innocence of Farmer Hodge and in his being altogether unconnected with the murder, if such it was, of Farmer Lambert. She was sure he had nothing to do with it, and deeply sympathised with Mary.

To this latter a loving message was accordingly despatched on the day after the little party, asking her to come over to The Priory. The invitation Mary Hodge joyously accepted, and having got her

daily duties done, noon found her seated with Julia, whom, notwithstanding the difference in rank, she regarded as a dear friend, in one of the apartments of The Priory.

After a few words of condolence, Julia said to Mary, "I thought a little change of ideas might do you good, so I shall ask you to help me in arranging and dusting my china."

Do not start, fair reader, nor set Julia down as quite a goose, but it so happened that our heroine collected china, and in this process of acquisition she was aided by, or rather was entirely dependent on, the Squire, who presented it to her from time to time. He was a great admirer of it, and, true to his character as the type of an English gentleman, he preferred the products of home manufacture to those of Sèvres, of Dresden, or Vienna, or to the

Nankin blue porcelain which has of late become so popular.

A good deal of misapprehension seems to exist as to the functions of a collector, whether it be of pictures, statuary, old china, shells, fossils, minerals, or what not. It is easy to ridicule any such peculiar penchant. It is easy to hold up to disrepute what one does not like or care for oneself. A love of art or science, however, humanises and supplies fuel for the mental flame to feed upon.

Perhaps of all things which come within the range of a collector, china is that which has most subjected him to the remonstrances and obloquy of the non-collector. The china-maniac—a term not exactly flattering—is supposed to be one who spends money which ought to be spent in some other way, in the purchase of cups, saucers, and teapots, which, having escaped

breakage through long years, are henceforth to be conserved in cabinets for the edification of amateurs.

By way of preliminary to her china lesson, Julia gave Mary Hodge some very sound advice on the subject of handling china, telling her, for instance, by no means to take hold of a tea-cup, or cover, by its handle.

Mary looked at the collection with a kind of fearful awe, and, it must be confessed, was disposed to lavish warm admiration on florid and over-decorated Coalport rather than on the chaste productions of the time when Chelsea was merged in Derby—known to connoisseurs as Chelsea-Derby; but before long she could recognise and appreciate the exquisite transparency of this particular kind of porcelain.

Mary noticed also the rich appearance of the Plymouth mugs, painted with exotic

birds, and showed great quickness in remembering marks.

The Squire had given Julia some new cabinets, and had suggested to her that she should arrange her specimens according to schools, dates, and manufacturers; and this she was now endeavouring to do. But much thought was required before she could see how to manage this well, and though Mary could facilitate her arrangements by carefully dusting the china, and putting together pieces which had similar marks, it rested with Julia to consider which was so precious, which so rare—like a Chelsea sphynx with the raised anchor—that a prominent place should be assigned to it. Even Julia, with her considerable knowledge, failed to see the intrinsic beauty of some specimens conspicuously put forward.

There was in this collection a large

assemblage of valuable Derby vases. Some of these were so placed that Mary could admire the landscapes represented on them, and was told by Julia something of the history of the places thereon depicted—Newstead Abbey, the Chiaja at Naples, or an old mansion in Cornwall. But some important pieces of china were placed on brackets so far out of the reach of these young maidens, that Julia decided they should be left for dusting until some other day, when she could have the assistance for doing so of a tall, small-handed footman, who seemed always to know exactly how to touch these valuable possessions.

Mary was interested to hear how ladies, old and young, formerly used to paint and decorate china for amusement, and also to hear that many ladies do the same thing now; but the firing of the china, and the

glazing, which latter process gives it such great brilliance and beauty, were what she would have liked best to see done.

Julia told her this kind of work was very trying to the eyes, and how an aunt of hers, who had painted three dessert services as wedding presents to young friends, had injured her sight for life by so doing.

Mary Hodge listened with wonder also when told that a few years ago the taste for old china seemed to have so passed away or to be so in abeyance, that night-lights were burnt in saucers of fabulous value, and services of the dark blue and salmon-scale Worcester china were in daily use, whilst modern unartistic productions were reserved for occasions when company or visitors were entertained. Julia, however, did not fail to add that now all this was changed, and that even broken, cracked, and rivetted

pieces are preserved by collectors with the most extreme care.

With the aid of well-known handbooks, Julia Vernon and Mary Hodge managed to while away some hours in arranging and classifying the china—at the end of which time the specimens had almost without error or need of change assumed their proper positions, both the marked and unmarked pieces being congregated as they ought to be—that is to say, as in the present state of our knowledge they ought to be; for collectors widely differ in opinion as to the parentage of certain unusual examples, and apply dissimilar tests for determining what they really are.

Those who ridicule the collecting of English porcelain, on which Julia Vernon's taste had centred, seem to forget that the cultivation of this branch of the ceramic art gives employment to thousands of our

operatives, skilled and unskilled workmen ; adds substantially to the income of the country ; and has found favour with accomplished artists and their patrons in remote times, whence it has been bequeathed to us.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RIVALS.

THERE seemed likely at one time to be a rivalry between Reginald Lester and John Dangeley for the fair hand and truthful heart of Julia Vernon. That it should be so was far from astonishing. In rank these competitors were not altogether unequal, although the traditionary greatness of the Dangeleys somewhat over-topped and overshadowed the mercantile eminence of the Lesters.

Certainly The Grange family did not mix much in country circles, nor did they go to London for the season, but wherever they visited they were received with great con-

sideration, with that sort of refined deference due to the owners of an illustrious name and faultless lineage.

The family at West Woodham Court was also in good society in the neighbourhood of Errington, but, though very popular, was not deemed so *distinguée* as the other.

Viewed, however, in a yet more worldly way, the Lesters had an advantage. They had that in great abundance which the Dangeleys lacked—they had money. It was impossible, thought people, that this circumstance should be overlooked by Julia's guardians, if she had any, and some slyly added, "or by herself."

Opinions accordingly were divided on the question, which of the two young men, John Dangeley or Reginald Lester—for people assumed that it must be one of them—would be accepted by Julia Vernon.

In every country village, gossips more or

less abound, and it would have been amusing, had it been possible, to hear what they said to each other in Errington upon this favourite topic. We may, however, easily imagine how they would talk.

Whilst gossiping went on in and about the village of Errington, the rivals principally concerned in the matter under discussion, were engaged in trying to advance their respective interests. Julia Vernon often visited, and sometimes stayed for a few days, at The Grange and at West Woodham Court. This might seem a very fair arrangement, although it was entirely accidental—for neither John Dangeley nor Reginald Lester had, in this particular, any advantage over the other.

Of course it would not be quite seemly for a youth to seize the opportunity of the visit of a beautiful and “unprotected” female at his mother’s house, for urging and prose-

cutting his claims upon her, and we may at once assure the reader that Julia's lovers were alike far too fastidiously honourable to act a part in any way unworthy. Yet there are a thousand modes of showing regard,—affection—love, which do not transgress by a hair's-breadth the line of conventional propriety—there are a thousand modes of letting the loved one know that she is beloved, and of any one such, neither John nor Reginald hesitated to avail himself.

Poets writing on the art of love-making, describe rapturously the language of courtship expressed by flowers, by the waving of the fan and handkerchief, and so on, but these are antiquated methods of making love, adopted and practised in the middle ages and thenceforward. More commended may now be that which is carried on, not by signals or symbols, but by delicate

attentions paid, and recognition of them indicated.

At all events thus did the rivals spoken of proceed to sap, and if possible to undermine, the citadel within which Julia Vernon's heart and sympathies were stowed away and guarded.

The citadel was not impregnable, but who was destined to reduce and conquer it? The answer to this question would be—he who could best estimate her character, he who could best understand her delicacy of sentiment—the intenseness of her wish to do what was right—the hatred she felt for what was wrong—and further, the adoration she paid to whatsoever on earth or beyond its atmosphere, is more immediately than aught else within heavenly influences.

The man who could appreciate such ideas and would act in accord with them might

reasonably aspire to be the accepted lover of Julia Vernon, but none other could.

Tried by this standard, and subjected to this measurement of intellectual acumen and moral worth, there could be no doubt about the preference which Julia Vernon would give as between her suitors.

She would like best him who loved best—that is to say, who loved after the manner which she appreciated.

Reginald Lester was a right-hearted fellow, like to whom are thousands of young gentlemen at the present time. As regarded good looks there was little to choose betwixt the rivals; in other particulars there were differences which must be noticed.

Reginald Lester had been to a university, so had John Dangeley—in that respect they were alike. Reginald, however, being meant some time or other to take his father's place at the Bank, was brought up accord-

hinted at—on cherished and well tested feelings of esteem, affection, love.

Upon the whole then, as between the two rivals—if such they were—for Julia Vernon's hand, we should opine that John Dangeley's prospects of success were much the brighter.

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Melanie, "because, you see, wherever we go, we sing those songs together."

"Yes, that is just what I do not like it for."

"Oh, George, is it possible that you can care for that?" Then, blushing a rare and wonderful blush, from a consciousness of what her words might be thought to imply, she endeavoured to change the sentence to some other form; but the words had been heard, and the blush had been seen, and George replied with perfect self-possession and control, "Melanie, I can trust you."

"I should think so, indeed," said Melanie, endeavouring to obliterate the impression her words had evidently made by a pretended misunderstanding of his remarks as to her singing with Adams; "though you are at heart such a regular old Tory, you do understand a little about how every one now tries to humanise the lower classes, to bridge

over the chasms between different ranks of society; and so you can trust me, though I am not sure how you come to use that word to me. But I know men are apt to think women very quixotic in all this jumbling of ranks."

But though Melanie ran on in this exculpatory tone, George saw through all the rattle. Her first words, and the evident emotion with which they were uttered, recurred repeatedly to his mind, and when they did, a broad ray of comfort broke through the gloom. The ray of comfort was very broad and bright.

The young man returned home with his mind full of tumultuous ideas—full of hopes and fears.

CHAPTER XIV.

GEORGE VERNON AT THE PRIORY.

“So far so good,” thought George Vernon on the morning after his interview with Melanie Dangeley. “I must now try if I can manage Uncle Vernon—that will be a tough business which I don’t much fancy. However, as I am to dine at The Priory to-day and must have a *tête-à-tête* with the Squire after dinner, the matter may be as well settled then as not.”

George Vernon, though he expressed his thoughts to himself in this nonchalant style, was during the morning and afternoon of that day exceedingly uneasy. His old uncle had been uniformly kind to him,

and George, without any reference to self-interest, would have been very sorry to incur his displeasure. The anger of the Squire was known, moreover, to be a serious matter, and it was impossible to say whether he would or would not be angry in this case.

George Vernon would try, however, to manage the thing so that his uncle's intentions should leak out without any point-blank question being asked. Point-blank questions are often extremely inconvenient, and to the old Squire, under the circumstances, had better not be put.

George Vernon went to The Priory that evening for a seven o'clock dinner, and when that meal was over, and Julia, the dessert having been put upon the table, had shortly afterwards left the room, George Vernon spoke to his uncle thus:—

“I wish to speak to you, sir, on a

rather delicate matter. I have, as perhaps you have guessed, long had a feeling of affection for Melanie, that is to say, Miss Dangeley, and I have reason to think that I am not altogether indifferent to her. I am desirous of knowing what your views are upon the subject."

The Squire after a pause replied,—

"I do not pretend to say, George, that I am surprised at what you have said. A fine girl like Melanie may well have found favour in your sight. But what have I to do with all this? I neither would wish to object to it nor have I any right to do so. I think you know how to proceed without advice from me. Melanie's mother must be consulted; and if Mrs. Dangeley says yes, and Melanie says yes too, I suppose the match is as good as made."

"But, sir, young people must have something substantial to live upon. Melanie, I

believe, will have next to nothing, and my salary from the Bank is very small. I thought that perhaps——”

“Ah!” said the Squire, “I now see more clearly what you mean. You want to be told whether you can look to me for assistance towards settling in life. Is that it?”

“Well, my dear uncle, that is very much my meaning. Pray, however, do not be angry at what I have said. The question which you have surmised is all-important to me, and I do not see how I could speak to Mrs. Dangeley, or indeed address myself to Melanie in due form, until it had been answered.”

“Do not suppose that I am at all angry with you, George; I am far more sorry than angry. This conversation between us stirs up thoughts which I had long since put aside, and awakens painful recollections. I might therefore content myself with saying

that in times long past, I, as an elder brother, did far more for your father than could reasonably have been looked for, and that you consequently as his son have no kind of claim upon me. At the period referred to, the Vernon estates were not what they are now; they were, indeed, to some extent involved, and it has only been by a long course of careful management that they have been righted. I had also, in by-gone years, another constant claimant upon my bounty—your uncle Joe, so that I was then a comparatively poor man, though certainly I am not so now.”

“I have little recollection,” said George, “of either of my parents. I might say that I have none at all,—what I sometimes think I remember of them being probably what I have heard people say about them.”

“It is impossible that you should recollect much about your parents, as they

died when you were a mere child, but I will tell you somewhat of your family history which will probably be new to you. Your grandfather had three sons, of whom I was the eldest, your uncle Joe the second, and your father was the third. Your father and your uncle Joe had each a very fair fortune, but neither of them took to any profession or pursuit, thinking that life was meant for enjoyment rather than for any kind of work. Your father was a man of desultory habits: he had a turn for mechanics and for chemistry; he had a turn for agriculture, though he possessed no land; he had a taste for architecture and building, though he had not money sufficient for indulging it. It is said that a rolling stone, though it does not get moss, gets polish, and in your father the adage was exemplified; by roving about in the scientific and artistic worlds he certainly got polish,

and was an agreeable and instructive companion. Your father married against the wishes of his family, and did not better his condition by doing so. He became, in fact, almost like a charge upon the Vernon property when I succeeded to it.

“Your father had one peculiarity, which greatly increased as he advanced towards middle age; he suffered under the strangest hallucinations, induced, it was supposed, by the habit of taking opium which he had acquired in early life. These illusions principally manifested themselves in reference to foreign countries which he had never visited and scenes which he had neither witnessed nor participated in. These your father would minutely speak of and describe—stating times, seasons, and incidents, with extreme precision. For instance, he would affirm that in such a year, may be ten years or more preceding,

he was travelling in the United States of America when this or that befell him, though his friends well knew that he had never crossed the Atlantic, and that the circumstances to which he alluded consequently could not have happened to him where he alleged them to have done. Often from their very nature such circumstances could not have happened to him at all, nor have been in any way within his personal knowledge or observation. He has been heard minutely to explain the process of preparing tobacco as adopted in Virginia, coupling with it the name of the planter represented as his host, the whole account being mythical, though probably in substance correct, having been taken from some book of travels which had impressed his mind. I have myself heard him describe most graphically the Falls of Niagara, as if he had, though in truth he had

not, been present there. My poor brother indeed lived half his life in dreamland, and during the other half narrated what he had seen there. Such an existence was not very beneficial either to himself or to those about him, and it is not surprising, as I just now said, that he was almost entirely dependent upon me during the last years of his life, your uncle Joe having been abroad and wholly unable to contribute towards his younger brother's support."

"Your account, uncle, thus far is a very sad one, and from what you have said, I infer that I must suffer for the indolence of my father and the improvidence of my uncle Joe." Thus said George Vernon.

"Your father," continued the Squire, "certainly belonged to the class of non-workers, and I am glad you have not imitated him in that respect. He spent much of his time at the seaside and at

various watering places, having no fixed residence of his own; he took no part in country pastimes, and although fond of reading he never used his pen for literary purposes. He was indeed addicted to quasi-mathematical studies, and has been known to rise at midnight to pursue them, to make abstruse calculations, and so forth. But having had no proper education in this department of science, and nothing very definite in view, the result of all this labour was precisely *nil*.

“Your father led a life free from excitement. He never experienced the pleasure produced by successful speculations, for he had not enough money to speculate with. He never experienced the pride of the inventor who has put before mankind something original and useful—he never experienced the elation of the author who has been pronounced successful by the sale

of thousands of his books, by their translation into foreign languages, by the fact that they are read wherever the English language is spoken. Neither did your father devote himself to 'good works,' although he would sermonize very learnedly upon almost any topic connected with them. Your father, in short, was devoid of ambition, devoid of energy; he led an innocent, a rather selfish life."

George Vernon, thinking that little good could come from prolonging this conversation, repeated what he had previously said. "I am then, I fear, to suffer for the idleness of my father, and the extravagance of my uncle Joe."

"If they had done their duty, George, this talk between us need never have taken place. I am not however disposed to refuse altogether to give you assistance by way of settlement, should Melanie give a favour-

able response to your formal appeal to her. My intention is to settle upon you then five thousand pounds, and I shall not object besides this to help towards the furnishing of your house, for I suppose that Mrs. Dangeley will not receive you both permanently at The Grange."

"Oh ! my dear uncle, I thank you much for your kind intentions towards Melanie and me ; I see nothing now to prevent our union if she will have me. Should that be so we should hardly think of staying at The Grange, and John Dangeley will have some day or other to be looked after."

Thereupon George Vernon having warmly pressed his uncle's hand, sent his apologies to Julia for not reappearing, and withdrew.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GHOST, AND DEATH OF THE SQUIRE.

THE sleeping apartments at The Priory were such as might be looked for in a Gothic mansion. In some parts of the house they communicated with each other, so that the accommodation for visitors was much restricted, and space which in a modern villa of vastly less pretensions would have been turned to good account, was left vacant.

Perhaps this antique arrangement of the rooms—perhaps the existence, as supposed, of a subterranean passage leading from one of the cellars towards the church—perhaps the fact that plate and treasure had been

found in the house, first led to the idea that it was haunted. The apparition as deposed to by many, and especially by the domestics, who were at length threatened with dismissal on allusion to the subject, was a lady who roamed about as inclination prompted.

By some persons this ghost was supposed to be the spiritual remains of a lady who had died in the house, two centuries before, of a broken heart caused by the baseness of her husband.

The origin of the ghost, according to other persons, was this :—

In the time of the third Edward, when The Priory was really what its modern name implies, its Principal was Prior Anselm. Before being admitted to the tonsure, he had been a renowned baron. Who so gay as he in the banqueting hall, who so daring in the lists as Sir Anselm de Vernone ? He

had succeeded early to his patrimony, and it was natural that shortly afterwards he should look about him for a wife. There was at hand a damsel not unlikely, he thought, to respond to the softer sentiments.

Alice de Courcelles was his equal in birth, gifted with large possessions, and adorned with lustrous beauty; who so fitted as she to accord to a conquering knight the circlet of pearls which he had gained; who so worthy as she to bestow the favour which he should bear upon his helmet?

This knight and maiden met, and poured forth to each other the vows of sympathy and love. They met—not merely in courtly halls where there was little opportunity for an interchange of thought—they met also in wood and glade, when heart may speak to heart; when none is near to listen; when

the cold moon alone looks down compassionately on earth.

On some such occasion a promise was obtained from Alice that Anselm should be her husband on returning from Castile, whither he was about to go under the banners of the Black Prince, to assist Peter the dethroned king. This absence, necessitated by the laws of chivalry and feudalism, proved fatal to the happiness which Anselm had promised himself.

Alice de Courcelles had imagined that she was very much enamoured of Sir Anselm, but somehow or other when he was off to the war her thoughts took another turn, the fact being that in a castle nigh to her father's dwelt another knight, Sir Roger de Beauvoir, who was extremely fascinating and gallant. The old story repeated itself: Sir Anselm was forgotten, and Sir Roger took the place which he had occupied in Alice's affections.

The campaign in behalf of Peter the Cruel having been short and decisive, Sir Anselm de Vernone returned to his baronial castle full of hope and eagerness that Alice should be his bride; he arrived just in time to prevent her becoming the bride of another.

A tilting match *à outrance* between the rival knights ensued, resulting in the defeat and death of Sir Roger, which was shortly followed by that of Alice, who died of a broken heart. Thereupon Sir Anselm condemned himself for the residue of his life to a monastic cell; and Alice, in her spiritual state, was sentenced from above to wander for ever through scenes familiar to her in life, harmless to humanity, yet at times prophetic of misfortune to the Vernons.

The conduct of this ghost was in one respect eccentric. It had, or was thought to have, a twofold aspect: at one time her

features were sad and mournful, at another they were terrific.

In its mildest aspect the ghost was certainly quite harmless; its appearance did not seem to foreshadow or presage anything connected with the fortunes of the Vernon family or its dependants—it did not seem to foreshadow or presage anything at all. It had, however, frightened a good many persons who had, or imagined that they had, seen it.

Yet why should so innocent a being cause alarm? Because it appertained to another world, to another race or order of existences, with whose organization and qualities we are unacquainted? The unknown, as we are taught at school, is marvellous; the inexplicable chills us with a kind of awe; and a being who has never hitherto prefigured evil may, perchance, be made an instrument for doing so.

This ghost had the knack of gliding through locked and bolted doors. It behaved with great propriety, seldom appearing except to the female sex. But although the ghost had done harm to none, it had, as we have said, frightened a good many, and to doubt that The Priory was haunted was accounted amongst those who knew it to be quite heterodox.

After the colloquy between the Squire and George Vernon, sketched out in the preceding chapter, Julia Vernon retired to her chamber at the usual hour—this being an inner room to which the only access was through another occupied by her maid. Julia had certainly, as she afterwards remembered, locked her door; not only was this her regular habit, but she knew that she did so on this particular evening. At midnight a female figure, passing somehow through the door, stalked majestically about

where there are still existing coffers embedded in the walls, in which this treasure was formerly often kept, and of these iron safes or coffers the keys were held by the Superior.

On one occasion, however, when high mass had been performed in Errington Church, the monastic plate was on some pretext or other deposited by Father Philip in the church chest after celebration of the sacred rites and functions instead of being removed, as it should have been, to The Priory, and this chest he knew how to open by a secret spring.

The Evil One had put it into the mind of this friar by a sacrilegious act at once to get possession of what he coveted. Accordingly that very night, when the inmates of The Priory were asleep, Friar Philip, having provided himself with a horn lantern, proceeded to the postern opening into the

subterranean passage, passed along the closed corridor, entered Errington Church, and despoiled the oaken chest of its precious contents, comprising, besides many other valuables, plates, candlesticks and crucifixes of gold or silver, studded with diamonds and rubies; these he carried away with him as best he might, not, of course, meaning to take them to his own cell at The Priory, but to some one of the many secret and out-of-the-way places there with which he was well acquainted.

No thought of harm or of impending mischief was in Friar Philip's mind, everything had gone well with him, he had no apprehension whatsoever. The devil, it is said, deals well with his children, and certainly he seemed to have done so in this case with Friar Philip.

The friar having passed out of, and carefully closed behind him, the door from the

church into the underground gallery, went onward with his spoil, carrying the lantern in his hand. He neared the entrance to The Priory—the prey was within his grasp—then came a breath of air which by some chance extinguished the lantern—all was for a moment dark.

Still Friar Philip's heart did not fail him; he knew the place well—he knew every inch of it; he groped his way along the wall; he must now, he thought, be quite close to the access to The Priory; but there his progress was arrested, not by bolts, by bars or chains, but by a spectre, for, streaming with supernatural lustre, through the pitchy darkness came upon Father Philip's eyes the outline of a female robed in white. Her countenance was as that of a Fury, terrible and fell; sunlike brightness issued from her.

The figure waved her hand in the direction of the friar, as if to say, "Begone."

He uttered a wild scream, and dropped in a trance upon the floor.

The sleepy brethren in The Priory awakened at that scream—there was but one, yet it sufficed to guide them to the spot—Friar Philip was found dead, his booty lay scattered round him.

Reader! wouldst thou know who was this Friar Philip? His lay name had been Francis de Vernone.

Such having been, in brief, a story current at The Priory, we must now resume the thread of our narrative.

In the morning after Julia's observance of the ghost, there was consternation at The Priory, for on the valet entering his master's room, the old squire was found sitting in his chair quite dead; as shown by the autopsy, a vessel near the heart had burst. Death had been instantaneous; the features were placid and composed.

Slightly altering the poet's words, we might say in reference to what had happened—

“ This night a life from earth was riven ;
This night a soul to God was given.”

Had the event then been prefigured by the ghost ? He would be a bold man who said it had, and he, perhaps, equally bold who said that it had not been.

If there be, as great philosophers have thought, some connection between the seen and the unseen world, some relation of the one to the other of them, not recognised by our ordinary senses, it may well be that the apparition to a human eye of a spiritual being may be meant to announce, perhaps to influence, the future. It may well be that such a phenomenon is not without significance. At all events, we may ponder on this matter, and answer it how one may, uncertainty about it will remain.

Not merely is death spiritually awful, but its effect physically on the face of the deceased is sometimes quite as awful. Those who have seen the dead must recognise this fact, and will admit that the lineaments of a dead person have undergone a striking change from what they were in life. Poets have written on this subject, but let us rather read how a benevolent and learned writer of the last century, a poet in prose, has discoursed upon it.

Some few hours after death, he says, the countenance of the departed "has a more beautiful outline, better defined, better proportioned, better harmonized, more homogeneous, more noble, more exalted" than it ever had during life. "May there not be in all men an original physiognomy subject to be disturbed by the ebb and flow of accident and passion, and is not this restored by the

calm of death, like as troubled waters, being again left at rest, become clear ? ”

The writer whose words have just been quoted speaks also of a change which sometimes immediately precedes death—precedes the departure of the soul for another world, and after dissolution remains fixed and settled ; such it is that “ the most inattentive must see, the most insensible feel, the immediate presence of God’s image. I have seen it,” adds our author, “ break forth and shine through the ruins of corruption, and have been obliged to turn aside in silence and adore.” God is there present to us even in the weakest and most fallible of men.

But though we may accept as true the views thus eloquently expressed, one who has observed the dead will further admit that his features, though they may be ennobled by this great change, present no idea

of what he may at the moment of regarding him or will hereafter be.

The idea of death cannot be realised, neither by those who search after it in Biblical literature, nor by those who seek for it in a more worldly way. The reason seems to be that we can only judge by those senses which we possess, though there may be many others, of the existence and nature of which we are quite ignorant. Certain things or phases of things only come within the range of our apprehension—all else is to us a blank which we have no means of filling in—no means even of reasoning about.

How then can we understand the nature of death, which signifies a total cessation, at all events for a time, of sentient powers—a total absence of those sensibilities by which we appreciate the fact of our own existence?

The funeral of Squire Vernon was con-

ducted simply, without ostentation, though in a manner consistent with the position of the deceased, and with the respect due to his character and genealogy. The fact was recorded at length in the local newspapers, noticed by the press generally, discussed amongst the villagers, and then the wave of time was preparing to efface for ever the memorials of Edward Vernon.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN MEMORIAM.

AFTER Squire Vernon's death, silence seemed to settle down upon The Priory. Julia had at once been carried off by Mrs. Lester, and the great house was practically closed. Impressed by the solemn event which had occurred, the domestics moved noiselessly about, often involuntarily speaking to each other in whispers, as though there were something sacred amongst and round about them.

Darkened rooms added to the pervading melancholy. The sun by day, the moon by night could only here and there penetrate the enceinture of blinds and shutters. But

besides this material gloom there was an ideal sanctity present in this place. It was given by the memory of the dead.

Squire Vernon had been essentially a good man, not looking throughout life exclusively, as too many do, after personal interests and advantage, but allowing a wide range to his benevolence. Throughout the district in which Errington was situated, his charities were abundant.

Although he was politically so far a party-man that he always voted on the Conservative side and supported the candidates for the county which its leaders nominated, he advocated every scheme for benefiting the public which he thought good, even when emanating from the Liberal party. He subscribed to charitable institutions, whether designed to assist members of the Church of England or sectarians. In fact he gave his money freely, as he thought well, without looking to the

right hand or the left, and without allowing any indirect motive to influence him. The loss of one thus characterized was deplorable to a parish such as Errington, of which the Squire had long been regarded as the head, not merely by reference to his wealth, his estates, and high position, but by reference to his sterling qualities and virtues.

As a county magistrate for Kent, Mr. Edward Vernon, though not quite the "Father of the Bench," had been esteemed one of its most useful members. He had been regular in his attendance at Sessions and at the Assizes; moderate in the views which he expressed regarding county matters; never inclined to run down a subordinate on insufficient proofs of his misconduct or incapacity; and in his behaviour and deportment on the Bench when adjudicating upon criminal or quasi-criminal cases, above all suspicion of partiality.

It is sometimes difficult for a county magnate, however well inclined, to smooth the troubled waters when questions theological are agitated; when, for instance, a new rector or vicar is inducted to the living, and opinions are thereupon freely ventilated respecting him. Is he of the High or Low Church party? What are his special views in regard to the efficacy of this or that rite?—of the observance of this or that ceremonial?

Now whenever any such or similar discussion popularly arose, the late Squire had stood aloof from it. Much good he thought might be done by a hard-working and right-minded incumbent whose views would not coincide precisely with his own. Such a one could distribute alms, could visit the sick, could administer consolation to the dying, and had been appointed to the cure of souls that he might do so. Was he then

to be thwarted in any such holy work? The Squire had thought that he was not, and acted uniformly in accordance with his view. Therefore he had worked harmoniously for the good of Errington with Mr. Jabez Titmarsh and his predecessors, and hence another reason why, on his departure from life, he was deeply and deservedly regretted.

If to his co-parishioners and neighbours Squire Vernon's conduct had been exemplary and without reproach, it assuredly had been so towards his relatives and family connections; he had relinquished, through sense of filial duty, a hope of uniting himself to one who was dear to him; he had, when in somewhat straitened circumstances, bravely assisted his brethren; he had taken Julia to reside under his own roof; he had done what could be expected for his nephew George; he was looked up

to by all who knew him with consideration, respect, and love.

What then was it which cast such a gloom over The Priory at Squire Vernon's death? what then was it which imparted an odour of sanctity to the place—which kept its inmates noiseless, taciturn, subdued? It was the memory of departed goodness, the recalling of what had been done by him now gone for ever from the scene, the actions and conduct of one not prominent nor conspicuous, yet who did good from day to day throughout a long and honourable life—

“The actions of the just
Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.”

CHAPTER XVII.

DESTROYING THE WILL.

AFTER the funeral rites of the late Squire had been performed, it was of course necessary to ascertain the provisions of his will for the behoof of such as might be concerned therein, and much speculation was afloat in Errington upon this subject. Poor Julia, who was deeply afflicted by the sad event which had occurred, after staying for a few days at The Grange, had been kindly invited by the Lesters to West Woodham Court, where, for the present, she took refuge, and from Mrs. Lester and her daughters received the most tender care, and every consolation which could be offered.

Upon George Vernon, as next of kin, devolved the task of looking up the will, and taking it for granted that it was in the hands of Messrs. Flox & Co., the eminent solicitors of Bedford Row, who had for many years been employed by Squire Vernon, he at once wrote to them about it.

Their reply surprised him ; the firm had never prepared any will for the Squire, had never been consulted by him about testamentary arrangements, and on examining the papers relating to his affairs which were in their hands, found amongst them nothing in the nature of a will. They advised, however, that inquiry should be made at Messrs. Lester & Co.'s Bank, where the Squire had kept his cash account, and where the will was not unlikely to have been deposited. George Vernon felt almost sure that the will was not at the bank, but

nevertheless made inquiry there, and found that his conjecture was correct.

Besides advertising for the will, which was done without result, a strict search for it had to be made at The Priory. The fact of its existence had been surmised from what the servants said who had been called in to witness the Squire's signature to it; nevertheless the will could not be found, and although the date of its supposed execution was of course known, yet as it was made some time since, it was thought quite possible that the Squire had intended to alter its provisions so as to be more or less favourable to George Vernon and less or more so to the Dangeleys; that he had accordingly destroyed the will, and had been overtaken by death before another had been prepared by him.

In this supposition there was nothing improbable, for old Mr. Vernon was not in

the habit of asking advice or aid from his solicitors unless when compelled to do so, and he had especially a dread of divulging his testamentary intentions to any one. This feeling was well known amongst the household at The Priory, and under the circumstances was natural.

Accordingly desks, drawers of library table, iron safes, plate boxes, blotting-books, writing-cases, and cabinets were repeatedly rummaged and examined. In this search the confidential butler took part, and so did John Dangeley. In seeking for a will the most unlikely places must not be overlooked, and John Dangeley recollected a well-authenticated story of a will affecting the distribution of a quarter of a million sterling, which, after long delay, was at length turned out of the padding of an antiquated pillion, put aside as useless in a lumber room. In this instance the will had

been executed whilst the testator retained his faculties, and when many years afterwards his intellect became impaired, he did not attempt to make another will; but that which had been executed he from time to time hid away, sometimes getting up in the middle of the night to stow it in some novel receptacle; and thus its last hiding-place almost escaped the searching scrutiny of his heirs.

Of places in which wills are not commonly deposited, The Priory contained an unusual number; curious closets, unsuspected sliding panels, small bell rooms, and great spaces between the walls of adjoining apartments, unaccounted for and unoccupied. There was a story current at The Priory of one such space having formerly been laid bare, and a silver waiter and a bag of spade guineas having been found therein. But that had been before the Squire's time, and

beyond the memory of the oldest inhabitant of Errington.

We may repeat that not only did The Priory contain very out-of-the-way places in which valuables or papers might, at one time or other, have been put away, but it contained a prodigious number of them.

It had been said by a relative of the Vernons, "that there was space enough in the attics to accommodate a regiment of soldiers, whilst the apartments below would afford separate quarters for the officers;" at any rate there was the large attic, with a southern aspect, where Julia—when given to be meditative, for which she had much time in her solitary life—often sat gazing from a large sunny window, upon the immediately surrounding ecclesiastical buildings, and dark evergreens, far away over the uplands, ending with the celebrated Knockholt Beeches, the pride of

Kent, on the horizon; there was, in The Priory, also an attic called the long attic, which had formerly been the day nursery, and had admitted of all sorts of gymnastic feats amongst the youngsters, by aid of the extraordinary tree-like supports of the ceilings; there was another room in the attics where fishing-tackle, rods, and guns were deposited, and yet another, so specially reputed to be haunted, that scarce any one entered it after dark. Of sundry others description could hardly convey an idea—they needed to be seen to be understood; they had been the scenes of inexhaustible games of hide and seek when Julia's children's parties had been held; so it may fairly be presumed, that where living people could be concealed, a document, such as a will, might long elude the most exhaustive search.

George Vernon was now daily at The

Priory, and was sitting there alone in the afternoon of an autumnal day, whilst the search for the will was still in progress.

The room in which he sat was of very moderate dimensions, some ten or twelve yards square, two of its walls being hung with tapestry, in design Oriental, though supposed to have been made at Mortlake. On this tapestry were portrayed divers subjects. On one side was depicted a Hindoo Goddess with attendants, in the act of sacrifice and worship; on the other side was portrayed a bride being taken to her husband in a chariot drawn by leopards. In either scene the subordinate parts were elaborately worked out—trees, butterflies, birds of gaudy plumage, and tropical in kind, being especially conspicuous. Throughout was shown that entire disregard of perspective which must be looked for in Eastern compositions.

A third side of this apartment was devoted to the fireplace, the jambs of which were of Italian marble of a rare and costly kind; it contained also a recess in which stood a table supporting a casket of massive oak, carved with fruits and flowers. This casket had originally been made for king Charles the Second, and in the middle of the seventeenth century, during the decadence of his fortunes, had accompanied him to Jersey, whither he had fled disguised. It was left there by him as a souvenir to the family which had extended to him hospitality, and from their hands had passed into the possession of the Vernons, by whom it had been highly prized.

Through the windows on the fourth side of this room, fronting to the west, streamed the glories of the setting sun. They lighted up the gorgeous colours of the tapestry, caused dark shadows to fall from the

antique furniture, and lingered over the chamber, which, to an artist's eye, would have been far from devoid of beauty.

Times and seasons may invite to a retrospect of past life, to some prevision of the future, thus leading the thoughtful to amendment, the frivolous even to what is good. In such retrospect and onlooking George Vernon now indulged; he took a survey of the past, and tried to penetrate the future. This was the somewhat incoherent sequence of his thoughts:—

“So the Squire has left no will!—at all events, after rummaging the house from top to bottom, none can be found. Is it likely though that a man so methodical as he was should die intestate? Certainly the will, if there be one, is not at his solicitors, for they never prepared a will for him and know nothing about it, and it is not at the Bank. Where then can it be?

“But what if there really be no will? Why then I, George Vernon, as heir-at-law, shall become owner of the family estates—of the vast possessions of the Vernons! And surely many a man has died without making a will, meaning that his legal heir should succeed him. Is there anything very wonderful in this idea? Julia would doubtless be well cared for by the Squire’s successor, and who is there to step in claiming to be his lineal heir but me? The Dangeleys are in no way related to him, and if John really is to marry Julia, the affair has been kept very quiet; and there is no reason to think that the Squire knew anything about it, *ergo* the estates could not have been meant to go to John Dangeley, and Julia is not yet of age.

“The property must assuredly have been intended for me, the heir-at-law. The

Squire, too, though a testy old man and perhaps a little nettled by what I said to him the other day, could not have been seriously angry, and was not at all likely to have made a will within the last few days on purpose to spite me."

Whilst thus pondering, Vernon's eye rested on the oaken casket in the recess. The lid of this casket had been made to open by a spring; no key, however, was in the lock. The lid was ajar, and the act of raising it seemed to follow naturally on a close inspection of the casket. Its interior was lined with velvet, peach-coloured, and fitted to throw out the radiance of the jewels which had probably once adorned it; their place had been, however, supplied, for it contained a roll of paper indorsed in the handwriting of the Squire; it contained a will—doubtless the missing will! An inspection of it was then of more import-

ance to George Vernon than would have been the possession of a thousand jewels—so at least he thought. Yet perchance a perusal of this will might be the undoing of him !

Now, George Vernon knew perfectly well what his duty was in this case,—he should have consigned the will to the solicitors of the Vernon family, in order that it might be dealt with in the accustomed manner ; they would, in all probability, have summoned to hear it read, such persons, relatives, or intimate friends of the deceased, as might be thought fit, and the executor or executors named in the will would then have proceeded to prove it in due course. However, he thus further soliloquised :—

“Here is the very thing before me which I have long wished to see, by which I can shape my course of life ; a perusal of which is all-important to me, and can damage no

one. Here am I, leading an aimless, useless life. I love, and my love has been returned, yet what avails it? Dependent in part, as I have long been, on the bounty of another, surely I have a right to know his final intentions towards me? Am I or am I not to be the master here? Am I or am I not to be the husband of Melanie?"

George Vernon was now alone;—alone, that is to say, with fate, with destiny, with sin! What was he to do?

When temptation faces one, either of two courses is available: it may be met by argument, which sometimes involves a denial of its real character; it may be met by a stern refusal. The former of these courses is the more seductive: there is pleasure in arguing with oneself: it is then not difficult to show the worse to be the better way, the risky path to be the safer, duty to be another name for self-aggrandisement, vice to be virtue. And

so, although the mere act of looking at forbidden fruit may be innocent—void entirely of offence,—the act being followed by the wish to possess it may be dangerous and perilous to the soul.

Imagine then the position of our friend—he is almost in contact with something evil—on the brink of a pitfall, with chance of jeopardising his good fame and self-esteem. The paper is before him—a mere perusal of it, as he had said to himself, can damage no one, yet the inward monitor tells him this ought not to be. He will obey that inward voice—he will escape the snare laid in his path—he will be true to honourable instincts. And yet, is it not reasonable, natural, and almost right that he should know what may be in store for him?—that he should prepare himself to meet it, to meet even the worst that can befall?

George Vernon's train of thought proceeded thus :

"How hard is it that the caprices of fortune should so persistently influence one's course of life, one's very being—should give to this person everything which may render existence a blessing, to that person much which renders it a curse—should even tighten or loosen the bonds of our best affections !

"Yet how impossible is it for many persons, through lack of education or of technical knowledge, to improve their position, to get money (accursed be that expression, and yet money must be got!); to any such consequently, life may be but as a shady lane ending in blank disappointment, the path running straight on, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left—dull, uninteresting, and monotonous."

An Italian poet has depicted the state of

mind here indicated—the struggle between vice and virtue—in words which may be thus inadequately paraphrased :—

There is an hour when honour seems
To waken up from useless dreams,
And so, with virtuous pride elate,
To challenge the decrees of fate.

There is, alas ! another hour,
When honour feels the Tempter's power,
And lacking virtue's strict control,
Gives up to sin the shrinking soul.

Ah ! who could hold the balance true,
'Twixt those who yield not—those who do—
Or who by worldly wisdom tell
Which path leads heavenwards, which to hell ?

Under the particular circumstances before us, there could of course be no difficulty in determining which was the right path, and which the wrong one. Our author, however, seems to have had in view a class of cases, in which much specious reasoning may be urged in favour of a

deviation from the straightforward track, grounded upon some false idea of honour. Let that be as it may, George Vernon broke the seal of the paper parcel, and looked at the dispositions of the will. So the Tempter had gained his first victory !

By this will the family estate and bulk of Squire Vernon's property were left to Julia, a handsome legacy being bequeathed to John Dangeley, and a very moderate one to his nephew George.

Before George Vernon had examined any portion of the will except its main provisions as above stated—before he had even looked at its date, or noticed whether it was witnessed or was not—he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. What was he to do? He had not more than a moment for reflection, yet in that moment he was lost. George Vernon threw the will into the fire. The footsteps passed the door of the room in

which he sat ; he had been too hasty, and the Tempter had gained his second victory !

George Vernon had entered that room an innocent man—he left it a felon, convicted by his own conscience, and guilty in the sight of God !

CHAPTER XVIII.

GEORGE VERNON'S REFLECTIONS.

WHEN George Vernon awoke next morning at The Priory, where for the time he had established himself, he had difficulty in recalling to his mind what had happened the preceding day, he had difficulty in identifying himself with what he had been.

“Am I,” he thought, “the George Vernon who existed twenty-four hours since? Am I the George Vernon, clerk in Mr. Lester’s Bank, where the most scrupulous fidelity has, in all particulars, to be observed? Am I the George Vernon who saw through the iniquitous practices of Dick Turpington?” Such was the gloss which

he put upon his then conduct. "Am I, can I be, as I think I am, the beloved of Melanie Dangeley?"

Having satisfied himself gradually of his own identity, the above train of thought, which first passed through George Vernon's mind, was followed by another.

Again communing with himself he said : "What was I formerly, in the eyes of men? What shall I be hereafter? Till yesterday I was an obscure and nameless person, without a chance of advancement in life, without a chance of ever prominently figuring on its stage—not exactly a dependant upon others, yet far from being my own master. The sole redeeming feature in the past was my love for Melanie, and, as I have ventured to believe, her love for me. This was the star which brightened my career, and shed its rays over what would otherwise have been the densest gloom.

“What shall I be hereafter in the eyes of men? The owner of great estates; the principal proprietor in this locality, probably member for this division of the county, and the husband of Melanie Dangleley. The husband! Heavens! Can there be such a union of honesty, of honour, of truthfulness, with what is false, is fraudulent, is sinful? Can there be genuine heartfelt attachment between the guilty and the good?”

Having breakfasted, George Vernon proceeded to wander over The Priory and its contiguous domain. These he at once regarded as his own—“They are my own,” he said within himself. “Who can take them from me?” Possession, George Vernon knew, is said to be nine points of the law, and he was assuming, as it were, to take possession; the tenth point, however, was also in his favour—he was the Squire’s heir-

at-law, and thus was, beyond doubt, so he reasoned, entitled to the Vernon property.

In traversing the many apartments at The Priory, George Vernon lingered longest in that where he had destroyed the will—where he had heard the footsteps along the lobby, where he had succumbed to sudden and strong temptation. There George Vernon lingered, and the past came in its minutest details before his eyes—he had but the day before entered that room innocent—he had left it, having done a “deed of shame.”

Would he then undo what he had done? This he thought was impossible. Would he try to obtain pardon for his crime? But if so, he must make restitution—

“May one be pardoned, and retain the offence?”

Restitution ought to be made, but to whom?

George Vernon accordingly, to some extent, comforted himself with the idea

that however weak or even criminal he might have been, the matter could not be undone or set aside in any way. He must, whether he would or would not, retain possession of what had come to him.

In rambling through The Priory, many things with the sight of which he was familiar struck George Vernon's eye, and gave rise to similar trains of thought. Were all these things really his? or were they to be his very shortly?

Having inspected the apartments at The Priory, George entered and traversed the ornamental flower gardens and the pasture land and woods which bordered them. Each somewhat changing scene was very lovely; each showed him what was his.

Despite what philosophers may say and moralists aver, a man does feel pleasure in looking at valuable possessions which are ungainsayably his own, or which will in

all likelihood shortly become so; the difference betwixt *meum* and *tuum* is then fully and entirely appreciated.

Our friend's thoughts, however, were not thus exclusively occupied, they ranged far and wide, and, ever returning to the same point, centred themselves on Melanie Dangeley. It would, of course, be impossible for some time to take any step towards the realisation of his hopes as regarded her. He must in the first place establish himself and become generally looked upon as heir to the Vernon property. To achieve this he must be very circumspect; not that there was or could be any doubt that he was the heir, but ill-natured people might talk together and come to the conclusion that it was all "very strange." Towards such persons he would try to express himself with moderation, and by forbearance conciliate

them. He was especially curious to see what John Dangeley thought about this affair; with him George Vernon naturally wished to be on the best of terms. He imagined that John must be aware of his feelings towards Melanie, and would regard with much gratification the change so imminent in his, George Vernon's, circumstances and position. Similar ideas suggested themselves as regarded Mrs. Dangeley.

Still there was one dark cloud, very ill-defined, on the horizon; it was in some way connected with the Lester family and Julia Vernon. Mr. Lester, as the late Squire's most esteemed friend, might have been informed of his testamentary intentions; might possibly be possessed of letters or other documents throwing light upon them. If so, could any evil consequences thence result? George Vernon thought not, but

was uneasy on the subject. Perhaps, however, his surmise about Mr. Lester having any special means of knowledge respecting the old Squire's wishes was incorrect—he might have none such. Nevertheless, it was clear that with Mr. Lester, George Vernon must be extremely guarded.

Julia Vernon had been most deeply wronged by the destruction of the will, but some partial restitution should be made to her, if and when it could be made without a chance of exciting suspicion. George would take care to do this shadowy kind of justice; that is to say, George would do it when he had thoroughly established himself as lord and master of the Vernon property.

Looking hither and thither at the past, the present, and the future, George Vernon fell into a sort of abstraction. He had known what it was to be without com-

panions or friends; he had known what it was to be poor; he had known what the routine of business was; and he considered he had known, though this might be doubted, what real hard work was; he had passed through one stage of his existence, and was now about to enter upon another.

Adieu then, to the past, and if he could but get safely through the present, all would be well: a prosperous future would be assured. He must now be calm, cautious, and reserved: he had a secret to keep, such as he never had before. No human being knew what he had done; no human eye could have seen, nor could it have entered into the heart of man to imagine what he had done.

Thus viewed, everything seemed to favour George Vernon—he had but to keep a secret. Little did he then estimate what that might cost him!

However, to George Vernon, at that moment the future looked bright enough !

Whilst indulging in these and the like meditations, he sauntered on through The Priory woods, until he reached, at a considerable distance from the mansion, the thickest part of them. Here a summer-house had been erected long ago, so placed as to command an extensive view, down an avenue cut through the forest by a former owner, over distant low-lying meadows which stretched away as far as the eye could reach.

On three sides of this square-shaped pavilion were splendid timber trees, with brushwood here and there around their stems. On the fourth side was open trellis-work, and a doorway facing the avenue.

In this summer-house had George Vernon often sat in times gone by when he was innocent—when his prospects in life, if not

very brilliant, justified an expectation of contentment, ease, and comfort. How were these prospects now changed! Was it for the better? His cogitations thereupon began to travel over the track which had been before trod, reaching far back into the past, and striving to penetrate the future.

As George Vernon, approaching the summer-house, thus pondered, not exactly looking about him, but casting his eyes upon the ground, he saw, or thought he saw, a human figure. It appeared to be that of a female past the meridian of life, not in the slightest degree like Melanie or Julia, nor indeed recalling to his mind any one whom he had ever known. What was this apparition? Who was it? Why was it here?

These queries George Vernon could not answer, but there the creature was un-

mistakably, and George Vernon entering the summer-house, confronted her.

“Madam,” he said, addressing the stranger, “I doubt not that you are enjoying this pleasant view. May I ask whether you are acquainted with this neighbourhood, and with this spot in particular, which is rarely visited?”

“Sir,” replied the unknown, “I am somewhat acquainted with Errington Priory; rather from what I have heard of it than from having seen it. I have certainly been enjoying the view. Everything hereabouts is exceptionally delightful.” This was said with something of a French accent.

“Would you like to see the house, madam? I dare say I could enable you to do so.”

“You are polite, sir,” replied the stranger, “but I fear I cannot now avail

myself of your kindness. I must return to the village, and I suppose it is possible to do so by this avenue."

George Vernon having shown the lady a somewhat shorter way to Errington, returned to The Priory.

The above incident made no impression on his mind; there were so many other things for him just then to think about.

Retracing his steps then to The Priory, George came to these conclusions. He would comport himself as the legal heir to the Vernon property ought to comport himself on succeeding to it. He would not indicate in any way surprise at his being such. Nor would he show any signs of joy or pleasure at the event. His manner should exhibit perfect composure and self-confidence. He would act as if he were merely assuming the position which he had long foreseen must be his. He would

behave with courtesy and kindness to all—to his equals, to those in a position somewhat beneath his own, and to his inferiors, his tenants, his dependants and servants.

“If I do all this,” said George Vernon to himself, “if I can but do it, no one will have reason to repent the death of my old uncle or the accession of his nephew. No one will have reason for noticing that there has been any break in the tenure of the Vernon property.”

Full of these resolutions George Vernon re-entered The Priory as heir expectant to the rich domains of which it formed a portion. .

CHAPTER XIX.

VILLAGE GOSSIP.

VERY different from George Vernon's reflections as narrated in the last chapter, was the village talk as to what had occurred, and was going on. Not only had the late Squire been very popular in Errington, and very influential, but Miss Julia was idolized by the poor. Towards them, as towards all who needed sympathy or help, her charity and kindliness of heart were continually shown. She went about from cottage to cottage, wherever she was needed, doing good—not that so-called good evidenced by the perpetual administering of alms, nor that evidenced

by the profuse and unceasing distribution of tracts amongst those supposed to be in want of them.

The good which Julia did was of another kind. Although she aided those who were in want with the contents of her purse, replenished liberally by her uncle; though she gave to the suffering and the sick—tended, nay, waited on, the infirm and aged, and sometimes sat at the bedside of the dying—it was not for all this that she was beloved. It was for her gentle, gracious manner, for her softness and tenderness, for the sweetness of her voice, for the thousand charms flowing from her bearing and demeanour.

Is it, reader, or is it not true, that an angel ever visits, or revisits earth? Is it or is it not true that such a being is sometimes near us unawares, nerving us in the hour of danger, strengthening us

in the hour of weakness or tribulation, soothing our griefs, and allaying our irritations? Perhaps this may not be, though there may sometimes doubtless be nigh to any of us a being not less adorable—a good and graceful woman, shedding around her an undefinable, an unearthly influence.

Such then was the esteem, the affection felt for Julia Vernon by the villagers. They could not therefore believe, when they were told, that she had been left unprovided for, nay, destitute by the late Squire. How could that be, as she had been treated by him for years as an adopted child?

But that Mr. George should have the Vernon estates, was not to be credited—it was not a likely thing at all. He was not thought by the Erringtonians to have been on an especially good footing with the

Squire, and although it would not have been extraordinary had a good legacy been left him, the idea of his succeeding to the entire Vernon property was not to be entertained—was preposterous.

As regarded the position of John Dangley, and the question whether he could reasonably have expected to be benefited by the Squire's will, opinions amongst the villagers at Errington were much divided. Some thought that his family had always been on such cordial terms with the late Mr. Vernon, that it would not have been surprising if Mr. John had been nominated as his heir, and in support of this view reliance was especially placed on the matrimonial connection supposed to be probable between young Mr. John and Miss Julia. Other wiseacres pooh-poohed the idea suggested, and had no doubt that the young lady was meant to have

been and ought to be the late Squire's heiress.

Whilst the news of the Squire's death was quite recent, and until his interment had taken place, these speculations about the future occupant of The Priory were spoken in low whispers and with "bated breath."

Indeed uncertainty about how the last honours would be paid to the memory of one who had lived quietly in their midst all his life, fully occupied at first the thoughts of the villagers; for in country places perhaps more interest and importance are attached to the due celebration of funeral rites than elsewhere.

There were still living in the village some who remembered the death of the Squire's mother—Madam Vernon, or Lady Vernon, as she was often called by the rustics, though she had no claim to this

distinction, her husband having been plain Mr. Vernon. Madam Vernon had long survived him; not always residing at The Priory, but coming to it for a part of every year. Her arrival, in her carriage and four—a necessity in those days from the state of the roads—with powdered footmen, was still spoken of as an event.

Mrs. Vernon had also caused her name to be remembered by a legacy to the poor of Errington; still called by them “Lady Vernon’s Gift,” though it may be questioned whether this gift was so beneficial to the poor parishioners as Mrs. Vernon had charitably intended. There is no doubt that the distribution of it gave much trouble to the “Vicar and Churchwardens of the parish of Errington for the time being,” and caused much jealousy in the place.

When the late Squire’s funeral was over,

and the curiosity of the villagers in that particular was satisfied, speculation was rife as to the disposition of his property, and, as we have already said, when it came to be known that Mr. George Vernon was likely to inherit everything, and that Miss Julia might have nothing, the discussions were unending !

Mrs. Hodge having come in from Orpen Farm for an afternoon's shopping at Errington, accepted Mrs. Hepburn's invitation to an early cup of tea before returning home. "We shall have it quite to ourselves," said the latter ; "for Hepburn is gone to London to-day, and the children are out blackberry gathering."

When once comfortably established in the little parlour, with its window commanding the shop and enabling Mrs. Hepburn to see who entered, and whether the customer was properly waited on by the

young apprentice, the one subject of the day was fairly launched.

“I have quite wanted to see you,” said Mrs. Hepburn, “for I thought, through your daughter, you might have heard how Miss Vernon is : everybody is thinking and speaking about her ; one seems to know nothing.”

“I do not think,” returned Mrs. Hodge, “that we know any more than you do—Miss Julia wrote a few words to my daughter, and said she felt stunned like, everything had been so sudden and unexpected ; but she had for the present a very kind home at Mr. Lester’s.”

“Yes, that one may be sure of,” said Mrs. Hepburn, “for her own dear sake, and perhaps also for Mr. Reginald’s ; but everybody is grieving that she has been overlooked. We should all have liked to see her amongst us in the late Squire’s

place; and we are sure she would have made a good use of all she had."

"Yes, that is all true," replied Mrs. Hodge; "and the more we speak about it, the less we understand it. Mr. Saunders, the coachman at The Priory, who has succeeded Mr. Johnston, was up at our house a night or two since to speak to my husband about a new kind of seed potatoes. Mr. Saunders says he is downright positive it was never in the Squire's thoughts to leave Miss Vernon unprovided for. They were over at Heversham a few days ago; and one of the horses took to jibbing. The morning after, the Squire and Miss Vernon came into the coach-house to see whether damage had been done to the carriage; and Miss Julia said, 'Oh, uncle, I don't think that horse is safe; will you not allow Saunders to make inquiries about another?' And the Squire made answer

like this, Mr. Saunders said, 'I think Boney will serve me a good while longer; but when you arrange things, my dear, you shall have a handsomer pair if you like.'"

"Well, you see," rejoined Mrs. Hepburn, "a good many people can bring up things the Squire has said, which would be quite unmeaning if Miss Julia had to leave the place. Mrs. Broomfield, the gardener's wife, was in here last evening. Her husband, you know, is always a very quiet man, and never says much, but he had made the remark to her lately, that the Squire had begun to tell Miss Vernon what were his wishes about the garden, and his favourite trees.

"Broomfield never heard him say the same things to any one else; not to Mr. George, nor young Mr. Lester, nor young Mr. Dangeley. The very day before

his death, he and Miss Julia were walking in the garden, and she says to him, 'Now, uncle dear, you see when all the leaves are out, how much too close these trees are. It is quite a smotherams!' and the Squire he says something like this: 'Julia, my dear, I like to think that you will thin the trees carefully, and not too rashly.' Broomfield says he never heard the Squire say such like things before, so he looked at him—unobserved—to see if the Squire seemed well, and Broomfield thought he never saw him look better. Miss Julia thought her uncle meant she was taking upon herself too much, and said, 'Oh, I shall never venture to suggest that one stick should be cut.' But Broomfield says he supposed at the time the Squire meant something more."

"Well," replied Mrs. Hodge, "everybody seems of the same mind, and no one

brings forward the Squire saying the like sort of things to Mr. George. Indeed, none of the people about the house thought he liked Mr. George much—he was always rather stiff with him, they thought. But how the time does slip away as we talk! I must be going. Mary said John Adams and she would come and meet me by the wood field. I hope you will come up to tea with us some Sunday afternoon, soon; we may know more by that time. I quite think Miss Julia does not fret about all this. She was much shocked, as she said, by everything being so sudden. But perhaps, at her age, as she always has been taken care of, she trusts entirely to Him who feeds the young ravens when they call.”

“Perhaps,” said Mrs. Hepburn, “there may be some plan for uniting the two names and the fortunes. Time will show.”

"I don't think," said Mrs. Hodge, "it will show that. I could not say for certain whether Miss Julia cares for Mr. Dangeley or Mr. Reggie most; but I am morally sure she does not like Mr. George; I never see her look at him with her prettiest smile as if she did."

"Well," replied Mrs. Hepburn, "I once said to Miss Julia, that she had such a 'level life' she had no troubles; but that is not true now, for this is a great break down. But sometimes I think she will have a rise up again."

"We were saying something the same last night," rejoined Mrs. Hodge, "and now really I must go."

Such is a sample of the gossiping which went on in the village of Errington, respecting affairs at The Priory generally, and respecting George and Julia Vernon in particular. Sympathy was on all sides

expressed for the lady, and dark hints were occasionally thrown out respecting the "equivocal" position of the young Squire, and as to what might or might not have been done.

That something had been done with his knowledge and consent, if not by himself, to better his own condition at the expense of others, seemed to be assumed. But nothing whatever was known upon this subject. The insinuations dealt in were mere surmises resting on no foundation, and persons exchanged their ideas with becoming caution on so delicate a matter. George was not exactly a sort of man to be trifled with, he was known to be very sensitive.

The male Erringtonians, as was perhaps natural, spoke most of George Vernon and John Dangeley; their wives and daughters discussed principally Miss Julia and her

supposed lovers, her fortuneless condition, as they deemed it, and what would be the upshot of the affair.

Thus communed Mr. Twaddles, who kept the news room in Errington, with his next-door neighbour Mr. Snooks, the coiffeur and shaver general :

“Well, Snooks,” says the former to the latter, “so I hear that The Priory is to change hands, and will go out of the Vernon family after all. They say that young Mr. Dangeley is to have it.”

“Who says so ?” replies Snooks. “What’s Mr. Dangeley got to do with it? Nothing ; no more than I have.”

“But the old Squire,” says Twaddles, “could leave The Priory to whomsoever he liked ; it’s not what the lawyers call entailed.”

“That may be so,” says the other, “but no will can be found, and I am told,” he

added mysteriously, "that none is likely to be found."

"About that part of the business, neighbour," returns Mr. Twaddles, "we had perhaps better hold our tongues. Though I have heard the same thing said before."

"There is such a thing sometimes done as destroying a will,"—Mr. Snooks was proceeding to observe in his severest and most sententious manner, when he spied the arrival of one of his daily customers, and so this edifying dialogue being abruptly concluded, the participants in it returned to their ordinary pursuits, and the inhabitants of Errington were none the wiser for their speculations.

Rumour succeeded rumour in Errington, some of the most ridiculous stories being eagerly listened to and accepted. Nothing, however, transpired to throw light upon

the situation, the temporary excitement gradually died away, and the accustomed rural peacefulness incident to the village again prevailed there.

END OF VOL. I.



